

LEFT UNIVERSALISM: TOWARDS A MUSLIM FEMINIST ETHICS
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Abstract

How can we understand Muslim women's agency? Is it possible to see such agency through the rubric of feminist universalism rather than through the standpoint of religious difference? This project presents a critical examination of the creative capacity of Muslim women to contribute to feminist and political goals, not as women who are Muslims, but *through* their religious identities. My objective is to build a theoretical grounding for a feminist ethic espoused by Muslim women that is not based on difference. Furthermore, I argue that this ethic can be politically engaged, and can articulate meaningful interventions for universal expressions of feminist struggle. As such, it is a critique of current literature on Muslim women's agency which focuses on their particularity as the only site of legitimate knowledge production. I will argue that an exclusive focus on difference prevents these women from being understood as agentive through their religious identities and serves to isolate them from inclusion in larger feminist political discussions.

As the title of this proposal shows, I rely on the concept of 'left universalism' as articulated by Sekyi-Otu. He presents a strong argument for the use of universalism as a tool in the hands of non-Western cultures to bring out organic and generative theoretical ideals that lead to progressive social and political change. Within poststructural and postcolonial studies, universalism has (rightfully) been deemed suspect in projects of Western cultural and political domination. However, Sekyi-Otu points out that condemning universalism as an imposition ultimately prevents non-Westerners from reclaiming parts of their tradition that overlap with Western values. A focus on 'decolonizing' universalism is crucial for two reasons: I will argue that colonial cooptation of feminism in many Islamic countries has provoked widespread

suspicion of universalist feminist goals and has stifled creative self-invention from within.

Similarly, global conditions of insecurity have fueled Western suspicion of the Muslim 'Other' as being incorrigible and incapable of lofty ideals and universal values. Left universalism provides a theoretical methodology to better theorize religious women's agency, ultimately highlighting universal aspects of feminist agency, such as multidimensionality and relationality.

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Introduction

This dissertation is personal. It is an attempt to see if I can align both my “subjective” and “objective” worlds theoretically, to open new possibilities in my material and embodied life. My world as a Muslim woman and mother in a close-knit community poses certain limitations in imagining religious agency as engaged in supposedly “secular” concepts, such as politics and feminism. My world as a professional academic and theorist demands a kind of rationality and “secular” critique that does not leave room for subjectivity and spirituality. For me, my identity as a woman, and a feminist, transcends these intellectual and cultural categories and challenges me to ask – why do I have to choose one definition of religious feminist agency? Why do I have to be either rational and objective, or religious and subjective? Patriarchy comes in various forms, such as in religious interpretations that dictate how women should behave or dress. But it can also look like male professors refusing to value women’s experiences over authoritative theoretical interpretations, or male colleagues who want to help by encouraging you to do what they do, although these are harder to recognize because they belong to the “secular” academy. I want to get at the ways that women (of all races, orientations and religious/non-religious affiliations) experience the world as second-class citizens and struggle to believe in the value of their own lives and experiences because of authoritative theoretical frameworks that limit our capabilities and horizons. Are secular academic claims to expertise and objectivity always accurate and rational? And are women’s subjective experiences, whether religious or not, legible in the public sphere, with rational and political implications? More importantly, what are the theories we can use to reconcile these two seemingly incompatible worlds?

As is evident from this description, this dissertation takes the starting point of my personal experience to build a theoretical framework to bridge the subjective and objective. It does this by collapsing academic binaries between secular and religious, particular and universal, theory and praxis, and public and private. My ultimate goal is to make this theoretical framework useful for the concrete, material lives of religious women. My personal experience speaks to the limits of current academic depictions of religious agency, even as it recognizes its valuable contributions in creating rich theoretical space for a topic that has been difficult to broach both in Western feminist theory and in the secular academy. Hence, I seek to build on this foundation and to expand on conceptualizations of religious agency within the broader framework of feminist agency, an area that has been well-theorized by many thinkers.

Following a feminist methodology that centers women's experiences, it refuses to bow to abstract theoretical frameworks as the only possible vantage point for intellectual and political analysis; I reconcile both subjective and objective spheres from the perspectives of both gender and race to present a more holistic lens for examining intersectional experiences. I also showcase a variety of theoretical perspectives for each of these intellectual paradigms, preferring multiplicity and creativity over unitary authoritative frameworks. I am transparent in my goals and objectives for the dissertation, frequently critiquing the academic conventions and biases inherent in different literatures. In fact, I am critical of the academy as an institution that often reproduces secular, feminist and racial biases, as well as hegemonic intellectual discourses that can misrepresent and even harm women. There is a feminist methodology that undergirds the entire dissertation, but instead of explicating methodology and then conforming my research to it, I will let the research speak for itself and then highlight its methodology at

the end. This accords with a feminist approach that utilizes methods in service of feminist goals and praxis and pushes back against traditional disciplinary and methodological boundaries that have limited the scope for feminist research.¹ Though I start with the literature on religious agency and critique its limitations, I then take a step back to broaden the theoretical horizons of the debate to allow for future research on religious *feminist* agency that can allow for a broad range of feminist capabilities and desires. I hope that by setting out this theoretical foundation, it will open the door for future research on the ways that religious identity can inform and strengthen not only embodied ethical formations, but also political, feminist, and other understandings typically categorized as only “secular.”

To give a broad overview, I work at different levels of analysis and try to link them with relevant common concepts. I sketch out the broadest level of analysis at the meta-philosophical level. I show that secularism is a phenomenon that permeates different spheres of life and works in the background of different theoretical structures. I then carry this into the second chapter, where I use the specific themes of rationality and humanism to show that we can find traces of the secular bias within the literature under discussion. At the institutional level, I show that the secular bias impacts both society and the academy. By society, I refer to political institutions in the public sphere, as well as the sphere of the “social,” which involves social relations, communities and culture. I also situate the academy as a social institution, both because of its structure within broader economic systems and because the ideas generated here are also reflective of social values. Finally, I incorporate the level of the individual, or small

1. Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 243-4.

communities, through women's experiences and subjectivity. I argue for the importance of keeping institutions, and especially the academy, accountable to the individuals they purport to represent. While I do not support a fragmented difference or an atomistic individuality, I approach the question of universalism from below. This is why I use a dialectical approach to universalism that can take into consideration particularity.

While assessing these different levels of analysis, I make two distinct but related theses to expand on the current depictions of religious agency. One is that religious agency *can* be political and feminist. This is a critique of the secular bias in which religion is equated with irrationality and oppression. By juxtaposing it with literature on postsecularism, I show that this binary can be found in the literature under review. In the final chapter, I suggest Islamic thinkers, such as Alfarabi, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Tufayl, who corroborate that religion can, indeed, be political and feminist. The second thesis is the feminist critique in which I posit that religious agency should be multidimensional and relational instead of only performative and individual, as per Mahmood's explication. By juxtaposing with literature on feminist agency, I show that women's agency must not be confined to categories and must incorporate different aspects of their subjectivity and their embeddedness in family and society. This is not just a religious women's issue but an *all* women's issue, and this is demonstrated through various feminist thinkers. I mention a few Islamic thinkers – such as Rumi and Kecia Ali – who illustrate religious aspects of love and interrelatedness. For both of these theses, I describe a tension between particularity and universality, and it is this problem that I grapple with in the latter half of the dissertation.

To summarize my main research question, I interrogate *why* it is that religious women's everyday experiences are not intelligible in current understandings of religious agency. Instead of giving an alternative interpretation, I seek to understand the discourses that legitimize this view of agency to better understand the larger challenges facing feminism today. In this way, I demonstrate my thesis that religious women are not radically different from other women in the way they live, think, work and love. In this way, I focus on commonality instead of difference to situate Muslim women among all women in their struggles for recognition and empowerment. While the literature under discussion creates space to recognize unique aspects of religious agency, a focus on difference can create a sphere of exceptionalism for these women which is ultimately counterproductive. I also position my critique within intersectional feminism – even the emphasis on difference in intersectionality is struggling to understand how to include religious women's feminist experiences. I question if it is feasible to apply a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity under power and a Butlerian concept of gender performativity to a phenomenon as complex as religious subjectivity. I push to expand the idea of pious agency to include other aspects of feminist agency. In this way, I position religious feminist agency under the umbrella of feminist agency, broadening its scope and making it more accurate to everyday experiences.

In the first chapter, I sketch the landscape of secularism, as it has emerged within Western thought and history. I explain the tensions and contradictions within this intellectual trajectory, especially as they continue to influence intellectual works on religion today. These include the drawing of boundaries between the secular West and non-secular Others, both outside its borders and within. Through an analysis of different theoretical works, I trace the

two pillars of *humanism* and *reason* as being integral to the project of secularism, and as shaping its trajectory. Through these pillars, I show that a secular binary is constructed in which secularism is made to align with reason and humanism, while religion is then aligned with irrationality and oppression. This binary exists both in cultural and intellectual imaginaries, and structures how religion is understood and researched. I critique the academy for being complicit in reproducing the secular binary, through various institutional practices, as well as the way that critical thought is *necessarily* taught as being secular. I highlight how the Western canon of political theory reiterates this bias in showcasing religion as undesirable or uncritical for the purposes of rational theory.

In the second chapter, I introduce the literature on religious agency that will be the focus of my critique. I situate it within the landscape of feminism as it has emerged in the West, showcasing the tensions within feminist political theory, and its difficulties incorporating difference. Then I discuss three different works situated within the aforementioned postcolonial literature on religious agency – Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Saba Mahmood’s *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* and Sirma Bilge’s article entitled “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women.” Through a textual analysis of these works, I show that they can demonstrate the secular bias expounded on in the previous chapter, in which secularism is aligned with rationality and humanism, while religion bears the weight of irrationality and oppression. This bias can present obstacles for an analysis of feminist religious agency because it precludes religion as also containing rational, political and emancipatory impulses. I discuss various authors who critique this literature for reiterating stereotypes of

religion (and hence reproducing the secular bias). By juxtaposing this literature with burgeoning research on feminist agency, I build the case for a feminist religious agency that conceptualizes the multidimensional and relational capabilities and aspirations of religious women, thus pushing back against both the secular binary and the patriarchal assumptions it can generate. I also build on the critique of the secular academy in the first chapter by showing that there are institutional, methodological and epistemological difficulties for research on religion in the academy, especially about and by Muslim women. I critique hegemonic forms of academic discourse that can create a disparity between academic analysis of religious women and their lived experiences.

In the third chapter, I delve into poststructuralist feminism, since the literature on religious agency under discussion, as popularized by Mahmood in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, aligns itself with some modes of poststructuralism, such as in the concept of Foucauldian subjectivation and Judith Butler's notions of feminist performativity. Mahmood herself acknowledges her indebtedness to Butler and Michel Foucault for her novel conceptualization of religious agency.² To better understand Mahmood's religious agency, I perform a thorough discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of poststructuralist feminism, specifically regarding its favouring of particularity over universalism. Since feminist questions often involve questions of political transformation, theorists have questioned whether poststructuralist feminism provides an adequate foundation for strategic and practical struggles for women's empowerment and emancipation. Instead of a narrow

2. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 17.

critique of Mahmood's concept, I show how it contains the tensions inherent in the broader category of poststructuralist feminism, and present alternative theorizations. In this way, I create the theoretical space to build on Mahmood's concept through strong feminist theoretical reconciliations between particularity and universalism, or difference and sameness. This grasps the limitations of religious agency as an outcome of poststructuralist feminism's reliance on particularity and difference as the primary site of discussion of these women's agency. With a nod to Ethel Tungohan's idea of citations as love letters,³ and the tendency towards multiplicity in feminist methodology, I do not critique Mahmood's concept as much as I examine its broader theoretical foundation and expand it to provide a different perspective. I also utilize the strengths and flexibility *within* poststructuralist, or postmodern, feminism, to remediate what I call the lack of attention to universality within it. Using Robert Antonio's notion of "weak program" or "reflexive" postmodernism,⁴ I show that there is ample theoretical leverage within this area to self-correct or expand on religious agency to include more universal feminist conceptualizations. Through a re-examination of the range of postmodern feminism, and positing alternative theoretical approaches, I explore a nuanced universalism as a normative goal for feminism in general, and religious agency more specifically.

After exploring the possibilities for feminist universalism from within postmodernism, I turn to postcolonial theory to see if it can allow for similar scope for expanding religious agency. Since the literature under review also tends to fall under the theoretical category of

3. Ethel Tungohan, Twitter post, March 15, 2021, 6:53 p.m., <https://twitter.com/tungohan/status/1371595462977978370?lang=en>.

4. Robert J. Antonio, "After Postmodernism: Reactionary Tribalism," *AJS* 106, no. 2 (July 2000): 53.

postcolonialism, it is imperative to examine the potential for universalism from the perspective of culture or race. More so than postmodernism, I show that postcolonial theory's emergence as a counterhegemonic critique of Western imperialism makes it averse to universalisms, which have historically been used as an imperial tactic for exerting control and influence in colonized states. I analyze different branches of postcolonial theory, some of which are more amenable to examinations of structures. I then present alternative theoretical reconciliations of sameness and difference from a cultural perspective. Although the literature in this area is not as expansive as that in postmodernism, I still gesture to the possibilities within postcolonial theory for reflexivity that can allow for broader understandings of culture in creative and generative ways, while not forgetting the material, psychological and intellectual legacies of colonization that have imposed Western forms of universalism. As Ato Sekyi-Otu eloquently states with his theory of left universalism, postcolonial thinkers must "move on but without amnesia."⁵ He is concerned with the ways that focusing on historical domination and violence can lead to reactionary thought instead of seeking to find "native universalism"⁶ from within cultures to reconcile the theoretical impasse between cultural sameness and difference. Using the themes of this chapter, I critique the academy for reproducing colonial structures and ideas, reifying the problematic relationship between power and knowledge. I propose culture as a dialectical category that can reconcile both specific identities and collective theoretical understandings.

This dissertation aims to present a critical examination of the creative capacity of Muslim women to contribute to feminist and political goals, not as women who are Muslims,

5. Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 6.

6. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 78-9.

but through their religious identities. Because of the prevailing secular bias in society and literature, religious women are often viewed as having political/feminist identities despite their religious commitments. My objective is to build a theoretical grounding for a feminist ethic espoused by Muslim women that contains principles which can be generalized for all women. Furthermore, I argue that this ethic can be politically engaged, and can articulate meaningful interventions for universal expressions of feminist struggle. As such, it is a critique of current literature on Muslim women's agency which focuses on their particularity as the only site of religious agency. I will argue that an exclusive focus on difference prevents these women from being understood as agentic through their religious identities and serves to isolate them from inclusion in larger feminist political discussions. To rectify this, I propose a normative basis for feminist and cultural universalism to push back against one-dimensional views of religious agency. I do this with two different theoretical moves: a) By juxtaposing the postcolonial literature on religious agency with other literature on feminist agency, I work to broaden the scope of religious feminist agency and make it amenable to universal feminist solidarity and goals. I push for creative formulations of agency that more accurately represent the complex nature of these women, and all women who want to avoid being categorized or essentialized. Women's agency must be understood both as political and thereby transformational, as well as personal and reflective of all the facets of their identity. b) In line with the double-edged argument of feminist agency as both political and personal, I do a thorough examination of the underlying theoretical frameworks of the literature under review, to lay the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of gender and race that can accommodate both the subjective and objective levels. My ultimate goal is to challenge what I define as the secular bias that

creates an artificial separation between women's religious identities as being only subjective, irrational, and oppressive, with women's secular identities, which are associated with objectivity, rationality and emancipation. This is accomplished through a thorough analysis of both feminist agency, as well as broader theoretical engagements to reconcile the particular and universal. For women, whether secular or religious, this theoretical groundwork challenges authoritative representations of their identity that homogenize or essentialize them. The issue of women's autonomy remains a controversial one, despite modern-day claims to equality and women's empowerment. At multiple levels, more work needs to be done to reclaim women's autonomy, or agency, from the rational ideal that continues to structure their capabilities and goals. These questions of agency present a particular problem for Muslim women, whose identities are often predetermined and instrumentalized for political or intellectual legitimizations.

It is also important to be explicit about the limitations of this dissertation. When it comes to feminist agency, I avoid hard and fast answers or formulas. I endorse *multidimensionality* and *relationality* as key principles for feminist agency. This broad framework allows for conceptual space to work out particulars for different women in different situations, pushing back against misrepresentations of women. Nor do I provide a definitive stance against ideas of performativity and Foucauldian subjectivation, instead positing that women, including religious women, may behave in performative ways at times but not always. Another limitation of the dissertation is that it is a theoretical undertaking and I intend to use this framework for more applied research on religious women in the future. Even though the title states that I will posit a Muslim feminist ethic, this is not an exercise in Qur'anic exegesis,

Islamic jurisprudence or tradition. I avoid these sources of religious authority since they are mired in specific histories, instead theorizing ethical spaces of religious subjectivity from below. Similarly, I have not utilized literature in political theology. In the interest of analyzing what I argue is a gap within feminist theory, I do not engage with the broad range of literature on feminist theory and its many different branches, complexities and contradictions. Nor do I purport to engage with the rich body of work on Muslim feminism that exists; instead, I illustrate the theoretical presuppositions behind expressions of religious feminism and show the tensions and binaries that exist within them. Moreover, this is not a Marxist analysis. Although I use many ostensibly Marxist tropes, such as the topic of “left” universalism, the theme of dialectics, and many Marxist, socialist and materialist thinkers, this is not an exercise in reconciling religious agency with socialism. This dissertation is primarily a feminist project, and I utilize the strengths of some Marxist approaches and thinkers to support these goals. Lastly, I work within the field of political theory and confine myself to the literature and debates in this field. I have chosen representative texts from political theory and associated fields to support the vision of this dissertation. As with any focused project, there are existing critiques and engagements with these texts, and other bodies of critical thought that I have left out because they are outside the scope of this work. This project remains an undertaking to set out a theoretical foundation for future research.

By making this intervention, I seek to expand on religious agency to encourage future research about the specifically Islamic intellectual traditions that emphasize universalism. A non-essentialized version of Islam can claim its own tradition of feminism, socialism, and modernity. By highlighting Muslim works that speak to universal concerns such as feminism,

socialism and love, we can push back against current literature that addresses Muslim women's pious agency as submissive and passive. Although space restrictions do not allow me to engage in these applications of my theory, it is hoped that future academics will take up this challenge. Particularly, it is hoped that Muslim women will find in these pages a different theory that feels true to their multifaceted and negotiated identities and experiences.

Chapter 1 - The Emergence of Secularism

To understand the conceptualization of religious agency in current literature, it is useful to first outline the emergence of secularism in the “West,” broadly understood. We can then take note of how the secular binary structures discussion on religious agency, occluding political, feminist and rational aspects of their agency. As we will see, secularism is a vaguely defined term which leads to difficulty in intellectual discussion; by being defined in opposition to religion, it lacks a rigorous and comprehensive definition. As Charles Taylor underlines in his highly influential book, *A Secular Age*, the modern understanding of secularism is riddled with holes and assumptions which become apparent once the concept is analyzed.¹ And yet, the idea of secularism reigns supreme as a defining feature of life in modernity. How is it that secularism has gained such a prominent foothold without an adequate understanding of its historical and genealogical origins, and the political and moral implications they hold? This is a vast discussion, but some aspects will be clarified in what follows.

What is Secularism?

In discussing the explication of secularism, William Connolly asks whether the current model is sustainable or requires a recasting: “The historical modus vivendi of secularism, while seeking to chasten religious dogmatism, embodies unacknowledged elements of immodesty in itself... We may need to fashion modifications in secular practices today, modifications that both honor debts to it and support more religious and nonreligious variety in public life than many traditional secularists and monotheists tend to appreciate.”² The “immodesty” expressed

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1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 15.
 2. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

by Connolly gestures to the innumerable tensions that are implicit in secularization theory, such as its refusal to acknowledge its indebtedness and ties to religion. Other tensions include the difficulties in delineating the geographical and temporal boundaries of secularism (Mahmood³, Rajeev Bhargava⁴), as well as the imbrication of secularism with modernity (Bruno Latour⁵, Talal Asad⁶) and its resulting impact on the public sphere (Jurgen Habermas⁷, Connolly⁸). The “modus vivendi” thus appears to be bursting at the seams and requires careful analysis and modifications if it is to be applied to contemporary concerns about religion, including an increase in religious movements and new forms of spirituality.⁹

The term “secular” originates from the Latin word *saeculum*, which referred to a large period of time, or an age. Recent more familiar usages of the word can be found in the French *siècle* and the Spanish *siglo*, both of which denote 100 years, or a century. In the context of Latin Christendom, the word comes to refer to qualitative and quantitative characteristics of “secular” time that serves to contrast “God’s time.” While secular time is limited and based on the ordinary human time, celestial time is eternal since it will continue after our death. Taylor describes secular time as encompassing the conditions of our earthly existence, such as political

3. Saba Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Other-wise?” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 282-99.

4. Rajeev Bhargava, “An Ancient Indian Secular Age?” in *Beyond the Secular West*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 188-214.

5. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

6. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

7. Jurgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens,” in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaren Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 114-48.

8. Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist*.

9. Wendy Brown, “The Sacred, the Secular and the Profane: Charles Taylor and Karl Marx,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 83.

power and norms of property. Here, it is interesting to note the early contrast that was set up between spiritual time, which concerns matters of the soul, and secular time, which includes a sweeping area of “human” concerns such as the political, and economic. This early distinction between the material, embodied character of secularism as opposed to the higher, transcendent goals of religion have far-reaching effects on the understanding of the political today.¹⁰ Asad confirms that the idea of the “secular” preceded the political doctrine of “secularism” which is an integral part of today’s landscape. In his well-known book *Formations of the Secular*, he proceeds to trace the “anthropology” of secularism, much as one would analyze the anthropology of a particular culture. In so doing, he argues that the secular “is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it... nor a simple break from it. I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life.”¹¹ Asad brings to the fore the nebulous character of secularism and its embeddedness in practices of modernity. He then calls the underlying assumptions behind secularism under question and pushes us to interrogate them.¹² Taylor concurs that the binary that has been created between secularism and religion is overly simplistic. Since any notion of secularism relies on its counterpart, the question of religion must be grappled with; this presents its own set of problems since religion “famously defies definition, largely because the phenomena we are tempted to call religious are so varied in human life.”¹³ If secularism cannot exist without religion, but religion is omnipresent and hard to capture, then how can we

10. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 263-4.

11. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

12. Asad, 16.

13. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

accurately conceptualize and represent secularism? Taylor posits that secularism depends on religion for its very existence: “It is a condition which can’t only be described in the present tense, but which also needs the perfect tense: a condition of “having overcome” the irrationality of belief.” This “two-tiered perfectedness”¹⁴ that Taylor points to results in a secularism that is continually looking backwards to the past to define itself. Steven Bruce reiterates the difficulty in assessing the various causes of why and how secularism continues to proliferate: “There is no secularization theory. There is a cluster of testable explanations that cohere as well as anything in the social sciences. That they are sometimes ‘loosely employed’ is neither here nor there. What matters is that they can be tightly employed.”¹⁵ From its genealogy to its current usage, it appears that secularism contains inherent contradictions and tensions, some of which will be exemplified in what follows.

External/Internal Others

Some of the ambiguity around secularism revolves around its varied use as both an analytic and discursive term. While some scholars use it to refer to social and political norms and institutions, others prefer to take a genealogical approach which traces the various historical meanings of the word. Joan Scott differentiates between a Foucauldian approach to secularism as a “discursive operation of power whose generative effects need to be examined critically in their historical contexts” and an “analytic” approach in which secularism is “the linear evolution of ideas and institutions that brought us modernity or as a conceptual and political formation with identifiable characteristics.”¹⁶ Scott points out that the latter approach

14. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 269.

15. Steven Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 39.

16. Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 4-5.

would necessarily involve a differentiation between the secular (what is not religious), secularization (the historical trajectory of religion being replaced with human reason) and secularity (a quality of not being religious).¹⁷ Authors such as Taylor and Asad tend to use the genealogical method whereas Habermas and Connolly tend to focus on the public sphere and political institutions, although there is inevitable overlap between the realms of ideas and practices or institutions. Another difficulty that arises with the understanding of secularism pertains to the boundaries that it draws around itself – any precise articulation of a multifaceted phenomenon such as secularism is fraught with decisions about what, who, which locations and what period is included in its trajectory. Accordingly, many writers have tried to “provincialize” current definitions of secularism and have pointed out areas of exclusion along the lines of temporal period, geographical location, culture, race and gender.

According to Taylor’s conceptualization of secularism, it is inextricably bound up with the processes of modernity: “Modernity brings about secularity... This causal connection is ineluctable, and mainline secularization theory is concerned to explain why it had to be. Modern civilization cannot but bring about a ‘death of God.’”¹⁸ But what happens to this account of secularism if modernity is shown not to be integral to secular ideas? Bhargava approaches this question with an analysis of ancient India; he interrogates Taylor’s criteria for secularism as being Eurocentric and shows that adequate conditions for secularism were present in India before the development of secularism in the West. Bhargava prefaces his analysis with some precautions about the method of “translation” across cultures. The issue of

17. Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 5.

18. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

“translation” will be taken up in more detail later in this chapter, but it is important to point out the ethical quagmires inherent in an attempt to “reclaim” a conception of secularism that has been developed almost exclusively in the West. Bhargava cautions:

I feel somewhat less ill at ease about my approach because I believe that the connection between word meaning and context is not as strong as some people like to believe. Words travel faster than their meanings. Oftentimes, the original meaning of a word gets lost on the way, but another meaning from roughly the same family, residing in a different, perhaps a new home, is drawn ineluctably to the signifier. A suitable but imperfect translation occurs. Shifts, displacements, even subversions occur, but hidden similarities are revealed too, and new similarities are born. Perhaps a time has come to not overread or overplay differences across time and space.¹⁹

Even though he acknowledges the limitations of describing ancient India as “secular,” he believes there is value in stretching the concept beyond narrow definitions. As such, his discussion of ancient Indian secularism is a good antidote to understandings of secularism necessarily originating in Western modernity. Citing Taylor’s three conditions of secularism – the existence of exclusive humanism, a viable option to leave religion, and the extension of this option of unbelief to a vast majority of people, Bhargava asks whether the conditions may be slightly altered to accommodate the context of ancient India:

Although very little hard evidence exists to test whether or not such conditions were widely available in ancient India, it seems preposterous to suggest that a particular social imaginary associated with the modern West could also be present in ancient India. However, this also makes a secular age, by definition, available exclusively to technologically advanced societies with a large infrastructure of diffusion and dissemination. I therefore propose a modification of Taylor’s criteria that an age may be characterized as secular if (1) in addition to some form of exclusive humanism, other philosophical and religious perspectives exist. (2) This diversity is accompanied by a condition that allows for viewing these different outlooks as meaningful options and a third, different criterion, namely, (3) there is freedom of movement across them. A person could move from one to another or simultaneously partake of many, indeed, in principle participate in all of them.²⁰

19. Bhargava, “An Ancient Indian Secular Age?” 189-90.

20. Bhargava, 197.

According to Bhargava, there is sufficient evidence of Taylor's three conditions for secularism, when slightly adjusted to fit the Indian case, to qualify as an Indian secular age. As Bhargava states, "If an ancient secular age exists, then the link between secularity and modernity is severed."²¹ The neat division of secularism as a modern enterprise fails to take into account earlier models of secularism in the non-Western world.

The Eurocentric nature of the notion of secularism has been critiqued by various other writers. Jose Casanova probes at the European context of the origins of secularism: "It just happened that the particular, specifically Christian, Western European dynamic of secularization became globalized with the expansion of European colonialism, and with the ensuing global expansion of capitalism, of the European system of states, of modern science, and of modern ideologies of secularism."²² Secularism is understood by Casanova to be an outgrowth of Europe's colonial and capitalist excursions, and its political and economic consequences. According to him, this calls for an examination into the biases that may be inherent in secularism as it exists today. Peter van der Veer is critical of the naturalistic or teleological underpinnings of secularism as it is understood today, showing that secularism was aggressively imposed by the state and intellectuals against religious beliefs in the case of China; this is why "Chinese secularism" has different features than "Western secularism."²³ Mahmood also critiques the parochial roots of secularism in Christianity: "To tell a story of secularism is to simultaneously render its Christian underpinnings visible... For an anthropologist reading this

21. Bhargava, "An Ancient Indian Secular Age?" 189.

22. Jose Casanova, "Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective," *The Hedgehog Review*, 8.1-8.2 (Spring/summer 2006): 13.

23. Peter van der Veer, "Is Confucianism Secular?" in *Beyond the Secular West*, ed. Akeel Bilgrami (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 131-2.

account, Christianity appears to take on a cultural dimension – culture understood as an all-encompassing web of meanings within which the inhabitants of “the North Atlantic” reside some more capable of self-reflection on their state of enmeshment than others.”²⁴ Mahmood is responding more directly to Taylor in his works about secularism, in which he acknowledges that secularism emerged as a response to Western geopolitical and especially theological problems, but still believes that it can be applied to non-Christian or post-Christian societies.²⁵ For Mahmood, it is problematic to assert Western Christianity as the default position of dialogue with “others” through the lens of secularism. Responding to Taylor’s call for intercultural discussion, she is skeptical that this can take place from within the contours of the West’s self-understanding due to its parochialism. She states: “The prescriptive vision of *A Secular Age* is severely compromised, it turns out, by the historical demarcation of ‘Latin Christendom’ which remains ideologically impervious to its others. How would one imagine embarking on a dialogue when the other is not even acknowledged in political, existential, or epistemological terms?”²⁶ For Mahmood, it is important to acknowledge the power relations inherent in any construction of “otherness” in the secular-religious divide – an otherness which is “not only a product of their unruly actions but also an effect of how secular power establishes its claim to truth and normativity”²⁷ If Mahmood is right that the Christian roots of secularism ignore the dynamics of power that have led to its rise, then this necessitates serious questions about its ability to be generalized to vast populations. As she hints, the apparent resurgence of

24. Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Otherwise?” 284.

25. Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38.

26. Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Otherwise?” 289-90.

27. Mahmood, 294.

religion that is inherent, for example, in neoconservative arguments by Samuel Huntington about “civilizational” divides, demands a more nuanced understanding of secularism and its origins. Michael Gillespie agrees that the Western world’s lack of awareness about the theological roots of its liberalism can lead it to skew perceptions of other “civilizations” or religions.²⁸ As these critiques show, the temporal and geographical contours of secularism that are drawn neglect a host of “others.” In what follows, I will address some of the internal others created by some versions of secularism.

The categories of race and sex have also become points of exclusion within the external boundaries of secularism just discussed. Vincent Lloyd connects the external boundaries of secularism as a European and Christian project with the need to maintain internal intellectual categories. He states, “Secularism should be addressed not just as the management of discourse but also as the management of practices and bodies, not just as an elite exercise of power but also as the management of lives of ordinary people. Taking such an approach provides yet another reason to decenter Europe from the secularism conversation, for it discounts the privilege of the supposed intellectual centers.”²⁹ From this view, the impact of secularism must be discussed in terms of the lives of ordinary people affected and not through official discourse conducted by elites. Lloyd further posits that secularism has been constructed through the management of racial identities, especially in the context of the US and its history of racial subjugation. He asserts that “race and secularism are entwined. Put more starkly, whiteness is secular, and the secular is white. The unmarked racial category and the unmarked

28. Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 293.

29. Vincent Lloyd, “Introduction,” in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds. Jonathan S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 6.

religious category jointly mark their others. Or, put another way, the desire to stand outside religion and the desire to stand outside race are complementary delusions, for the seemingly outside is in fact the hegemonic.”³⁰ Hence it is impossible to discuss the emergence of secularism without also acknowledging its dependence on processes of racialization. Josef Sorett builds on this critique by differentiating between the “historiographic” or theoretical boundary of secularism and the “historical,” or the cultural/religious area within this boundary which is controlled and restricted by the intellectual demarcation. Particularly, he asks, “If certain, and singular, black sacred/secular fluidity is not to be assumed, then how have such distinctions been enacted? In short, how might a black secular be demarcated?”³¹ He analyzes the trope of black sacred/secular fluidity to show how race and religion were used to construct an American identity in which blacks and whites were connected, but whites most often controlled power and thus discourses of secularism.³²

Scott calls into question the assumed gender equality inherent in secularism, and the way this binary leads to perceptions of Western superiority against gross gender injustices in non-Western societies, as well as a blind eye to women’s oppression within the West. She is careful to assert that she is not drawing a parallel between Western countries and non-Western ones – only to show that the binary of secular=women’s equality and religion=women’s oppression is too simplistic to account for the myriad of convergences that exist and occludes an accurate assessment of the role of religion in society. She states:

30. Lloyd, “Introduction,” 5.

31. Josef Sorett, “Secular Compared to What? Toward a History of the Trope of Black Sacred/Secular Fluidity” in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds. Jonathan S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 48.

32. Sorett, “Secular Compared to What?” 49-50

It is the ahistorical equation in contemporary discourse of a reified secularism with gender equality—and the racism associated with that equation—that I think needs to be challenged. The current depiction of the evils of Islam in opposition to the unqualified good of the secular, with gender equality as its central feature, has served to distract our attention from the fact that sexual difference is an intractable problem for the nations of the secular Christian West, as it is for their counterparts elsewhere.³³

Scott historicizes her argument by giving examples of the way women were often confined to the home as representatives of a feminized religiosity,³⁴ and the “civilizing missions” in Muslim countries which were justified through discourses of “liberating” women, even as the self-claimed civilizers ignored gross gender inequalities within their own borders.³⁵ It is apparent that the demarcation of secularism involves both external and internal “others” who must be managed to maintain the authority and legitimacy of the concept. As mentioned earlier, secularism only becomes intelligible in contrast to religion – it is constrained by this binary so it does not assert its own comprehensive positive conceptualization.

Secularization Theory

After discussing the geographical and temporal boundaries demarcated by secularism, I turn to the substantive makeup of the concept as an epistemological term, including its historical and discursive connotations and internal tensions. A relevant term to unravel is secularization theory or the secularization paradigm. Generally, theories of secularization attempt to explain a teleological process by which religion gradually fades from importance as a social and institutional force. Bruce defines secularization as follows:

I see secularization as a social condition manifest in (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the

33. Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 27.

34. Scott, 13.

35. Scott, 21.

state and the economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.³⁶

In “The Secularization Paradigm,” he attempts to “clear the way for sensible debate about secularization” and to provide clarity on the topic which is currently in “mulched layers of caricature.”³⁷ He does this through a sketch of the multifaceted nature of secularization, outlining the ways in which social and cultural phenomena as diverse as the Protestant Reformation, industrial capitalism, individualism, rationality and science, among many others, enact a perfect storm of conditions for the emergence of secularization. None of these conditions were inevitable or reducible to a narrow understanding. He counters simplistic explanations of secularization that assert that it is universal, that it is always progressive, there is one coherent theory of secularization which has an even trajectory, and that the end point is always atheism.³⁸ Scott gives a similar definition of secularization as “the historical process by which transcendent religious authority is replaced by knowledge that can only originate with reasoning humans” and differentiates it from secularity, or a state of being nonreligious.³⁹ Her prerequisite of “reasoning humans” is an interesting addition to Bruce’s definition and is indicative of secularism’s reliance on notions of reason (which will be discussed at length later). Lloyd understands secularization as “the historical process through which religion recedes from public and, eventually, private presence.”⁴⁰ For him, the study of secularism through the lens of

36. Steven Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, 3.

37. Bruce, 1.

38. Bruce, 37-43.

39. Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 5.

40. Lloyd, “Introduction,” 5.

secularization maintains the hegemony of European intellectual history and prevents the inclusion of those outside this narrative; it also can't explain the "resurgence of religion" we see today. Taylor is critical of simple "subtraction stories" which reduce ideas of secularism to a simplistic formula whereby religion can be eliminated in a linear temporal progression. He states,

I will be making a continuing polemic against what I call "subtraction stories." Concisely put, I mean by this stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside. Against this kind of story, I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.⁴¹

According to Taylor, an integral aspect of stories of secularization is the idea of "subtracting" artificial features of humanity to get to an untainted core based on reason, self-awareness and autonomous knowledge production. It is crucial to unravel this false narrative in order to understand our modern identities in the prevailing secular age. He reiterates,

In other words, our sense of where we are is crucially defined in part by a story of how we got there. In that sense, there is an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age. And just because we describe where we are in relating the journey, we can misdescribe it grievously by misidentifying the itinerary. This is what the "subtraction" accounts of modernity have in fact done. To get straight where we are, we have to go back and tell the story properly.⁴²

For Taylor, the "subtraction story" interpretation underlying accounts of secularization negate key aspects of our ideological history and lead to a mischaracterization of our current socio-

41. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

42. Taylor, 29.

cultural identities and their political and institutional ramifications. It is evident that common conceptualizations of secularization are limited and narrow in focus and neglect the diversity and nuance of secular and religious belief.

Modernity

The correlation of secularism with modernity has been mentioned earlier and the two concepts are usually intrinsically related in the secularization narrative. In the preceding discussion, scholars such as Scott, Bhargava and Taylor have connected the emergence of modernity with the inevitable dawn of secularism. Taylor perhaps makes this connection most explicit: “Modernity brings about secularity.... This causal connection is ineluctable, and mainline secularization theory is concerned to explain why it had to be.”⁴³ In defining “subtraction stories,” Taylor also emphasizes the role of Western modernity in shaping understandings of “essential” human features along a teleology of progress.⁴⁴ But unpacking what exactly this relationship implies needs to be analyzed. Casanova concurs that the necessary co-constitution of modernity and secularization is not as straightforward as it seems.

According to him,

It is the tendency to link processes of secularization to processes of modernization, rather than to the patterns of fusion and dissolution of religious, political, and societal communities—that is, of churches, states, and nations— that is at the root of our impasse at the secularization debate.⁴⁵

The overlapping of secularism and modernity can obscure more nuanced historical explanations that have to do with political, religious, and cultural institutions and ideologies and their

43. Taylor, 21.

44. Taylor, 22.

45. Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” 15.

impacts. This leads to an “impasse” in which theories of secularism fail to explain phenomena just as the continued appeal of religion and spirituality, sidelines the “others” of secularism, and creates a hierarchy between those who are “enlightened” and those who are not. It can be noted here that while Taylor sees modernity as crucial to the emergence of secularism, he does seek to illustrate its complex and contingent character, such as its normative ideals,⁴⁶ accounts of agency,⁴⁷ political space,⁴⁸ and views of autonomy.⁴⁹

Asad presents one of the most thorough accounts of modernity and its limitations in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Instead of seeing modernity as an inevitable process of maturation in the trajectory of Western intellectual history, he brings out its constructed nature in the context of imperialism:

It is right to say that “modernity” is neither a totally coherent object nor a clearly bounded one, and that many of its elements originate in relations with the histories of peoples outside Europe. Modernity is a *project* – or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market – and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge.⁵⁰

This considerably more detailed and comprehensive understanding of modernity adds a self-reflexive layer that is sensitive to power relations, economic inequality, political justification, globalization, technology and other aspects of the “project” which are usually not accounted

46. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 571.

47. Taylor, 573.

48. Taylor, 578.

49. Taylor, 588.

50. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 13.

for. If modernity is, indeed, a deliberate project involving power and special interests of the privileged, then we need to disengage the fusion of secularism with modernity to reach a more precise understanding. Asad notes the ways that the current “formation of the secular” serves to delineate categories of who is modern and who is premodern and holds the power to shape the identities and experiences of these groups.⁵¹ The secular, then, is a mode of being enabled by the experience of modernity and is thus not starkly demarcated from the religious. He states:

The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life. To appreciate this is not enough to show that what appears to be necessary is really contingent – that in certain respects “the secular” obviously overlaps with “the religious.” It is a matter of showing how contingencies relate to changes in the grammar of concepts – that is, how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practices.⁵²

Using a genealogical method, Asad traces the emergence of ideas of the secular through an indirect method of interrogating the “concepts, practices and sensibilities”⁵³ which have contributed to our “common sense” understanding of modernity and secularism. He wants to analyze the various contingencies that have given rise to these conceptualizations, but also demonstrate how they arose in terms of practices and experiences, thus showing continuities between religious ideas and secular ones that are usually not visible. Asad complicates ideas of modernity, allowing us to extract secularism from the processes of modernity.

51. Asad, 14.

52. Asad, 25.

53. Asad, 16.

Latour also offers a critique of the very concept of modernity. He proposes we examine modernity from the conjoined practices of “translation” and “purification.” What he means is that our current understanding of modernity is comprised of the paradoxical but co-existing tendencies of needing to create mixtures of nature and culture, and of separating or “purifying” them by creating “distinct ontological zones.” The two practices mutually reinforce each other but also necessitate each other, creating a contradictory view of nature and ontological existence.⁵⁴ Unless we resolve this lingering dilemma, according to Latour, we cannot be “modern” because this paradoxical discourse does not align with our practices. He states:

My hypothesis – which remains too crude – is that the second has made the first possible: the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes - such is the paradox of the moderns, which the exceptional situation in which we find ourselves today allows us finally to grasp.... if we have stopped being modern, if we can no longer separate the work of proliferation from the work of purification, what are we going to become? Can we aspire to Enlightenment without modernity? My hypothesis – which, like the previous ones, is too coarse - is that we are going to have to slow down, reorient and regulate the proliferation of monsters by representing their existence officially.⁵⁵

For Latour, unless we can acknowledge that nature and culture (or human-made society) are intricately intertwined, we cannot come to terms with modernity and its possibilities; moreover, we will keep reproducing harmful ideological constructions such as artificial epistemological divides,⁵⁶ the domination of nature,⁵⁷ the “othering” of different cultures⁵⁸ and the production of technologies which remain disconnected from each other and the larger

54. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10-11.

55. Latour, 12.

56. Latour, 5.

57. Latour, 31.

58. Latour, 97.

world.⁵⁹ For Latour, we need to create a holistic “constitution,” or ontological view, that will resolve these tensions and integrate the best from the pre-moderns and the moderns.⁶⁰ The binary between religion and secularism is another area in which the paradox of modernity displays itself – on one hand, the idea of God remains intact as an overarching dimension of life, but on the other hand, secularization theory would have us believe that fewer and fewer people lead their lives according to religious requirements. Taylor agrees that the presence of religion is very much a part of secularism because both are defined in relationship to each other. He refers to this as “an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age”⁶¹ because secularism has emerged from religious roots. For Latour though, both impulses co-exist – the simultaneous existence and non-existence of God is symptomatic of the conundrum of modernity and its attempt to purify/translate concepts without acknowledging their hybridity and continuity. He calls this paradox the problem of the “crossed-out God of metaphysics”⁶² and explains how it is rationalized:

Everything happens as if the moderns had applied the same doubling to the crossed-out God that they had used on Nature and Society. His transcendence distanced Him infinitely, so that He disturbed neither the free play of nature nor that of society, but the right was nevertheless reserved to appeal to that transcendence in case of conflict between the laws of Nature and those of Society. Modern men and women could thus be atheists even while remaining religious.⁶³

The religion/secularism binary needs to be interrogated to include hybridity and continuity, like Asad’s iteration. For Latour, however, this is symptomatic not of neglecting the power relations inherent in modernity, but of the contradictions within modernity. Scott, Bhargava, Taylor, Asad

59. Latour, 117-8.

60. Latour, 132-3.

61. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30.

62. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 33.

63. Latour, 33.

and Latour all present us with different perspectives on the relationship of secularism with modernity and give us grounds for critiquing their compatibility and seeming co-constitution. This can pave the way for a non-teleological understanding of secularism in which it is not concurrent with and defined by processes of modernity.

“Buffered” Self

A key characteristic of modern secularism, as described by Taylor, is the buffered self. This refers to the conception of selfhood that emerges as a result of what he calls the “Great Disembedding” – a historical process through which the interdependent and interrelated aspects of life became disparate and disembedded from each other (this will be discussed in detail later). In the process of creating modern secular subjects, the first step involved the removal of enchantment as a dominant structure in our lives. As Taylor explains, “Disbelief is hard in the enchanted world. This is not so much because spirits are part of the undeniable furniture of things and God is a spirit, ergo undeniable. Much more important, God figures in this world as the dominant spirit, and moreover, as the only thing that guarantees that in this awe-inspiring and frightening field of forces, good will triumph.”⁶⁴ The use of enchanted spirits and God featured prominently in the lives of the pre-modern world, not just as a part of societal structures and traditions, but as a source of security in this enchanted world. Taylor refers to this prototype of the pre-modern self as the “porous self,” in contrast to the “bounded” or buffered self that would follow.⁶⁵ The porosity allows for access to one’s corporeality, as well as one’s place in the social hierarchy. Taylor describes the sense of sociality

64. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 41.

65. Taylor, 37.

that was a part of the structure of pre-modern society: “Living in the enchanted, porous world of our ancestors was inherently living socially. It was not just that the spiritual forces which impinged on me often emanated from people around me... Much more fundamental, these forces often impinged on us as a society, and were defended against by us as a society.”⁶⁶ In the enchanted world, it was difficult to conceive of a society in which we were not defined by social customs and traditions – both those which maintained religious moral codes and those that resisted them. Society defined our positions and purpose, even as it curtailed those individual desires through religious conventions - a “disenchantment” was thus necessary to strengthen the individual from any outward encroachments.

From the beginning, “disenchantment” involved a double impulse, both negative and positive. Max Weber uses this term to describe the increasingly instrumentalized and bureaucratic nature of modern society: “There are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means.”⁶⁷ Weber connects the process of disenchantment with less mediated human interactions and a privatization or mystification of religious life, but also with a decline of sublime or “magical” values in public life; religion is no longer a communal affair but becomes individualized. This is implicated with the prioritization of science and increasing

66. Taylor, 42.

67. Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 139.

bureaucratization and rationalization of society. The role of reason as a philosophical and cultural foundation of modernity will be discussed later, but here Weber is clear about the double-edged nature of disenchantment as both a positive but negative social force. Drawing on Weber, Taylor also sees the process of disenchantment as containing different simultaneous pulls:

The energy of disenchantment is double. First negative, we must reject everything which smacks of idolatry... the second energy was positive. We feel a new freedom in a world shorn of the sacred, and the limits it set for us, to re-order things as seems best. We take the crucial stance, for faith and glory of God. Acting out of this, we order things for the best. We are not deterred by the older tabus, or supposedly sacred orderings. So we can rationalise the world, expel the mystery from it (because it is all now concentrated in the will of God). A great energy is released to re-order affairs in secular time.⁶⁸

Taylor describes disenchantment as initially allowing varieties of intolerant religious views to emerge, such as those of “black magic” and witches, before leading to the eviction of religion from the public sphere. This was countered by the positive force of man as an unfettered entity capable of establishing his own moral order, although recourse to God is still available at a transcendent, private level. The new-found freedom and possibility of disenchanted life relates to individualism, rationalization and science in “secular time.”

While time in the period of enchantment is connected to one’s place in an established hierarchy in the cosmos, secular time “disembeds” the human being from this larger context in favour of a new kind of order: “Partly as a result of the scientific revolution, the cosmos idea faded, and we find ourselves in a universe. This has its own kind of order, that exhibited in exceptionless natural laws. But it is no longer a hierarchy of being, and it doesn’t obviously

68. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 80.

point to eternity as the locus of its principle of cohesion. The universe flows on in secular time. Above all, its principles of order are not related to human meaning, at any rate not immediately or evidently.”⁶⁹ Secular time emerges in contrast to heavenly time, which is infinite and appears to be distinct from human needs and desires. Taylor defines the Great Disembedding as a new kind of conceptualization of the self: “In talking of our self-understanding, I am particularly concerned with what I will call our “social imaginary”, that is, the way that we collectively imagine, even pre-theoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world.”⁷⁰ He goes on to describe three different dimensions of embeddedness that are lost once the world becomes disenchanted – embeddedness in the social order, the cosmos and in the human good.⁷¹ For Taylor, the “buffered self” is a prerequisite for the larger cultural context of the Great Disembedding: “We could say that... the buffered identity... contributed to the disembedding. Embeddedness, as I said above, is both a matter of identity—the contextual limits to the imagination of the self—and of the social imaginary: the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society. But the new buffered identity, with its insistence on personal devotion and discipline, increased the distance, the disidentification, even the hostility to the older forms of collective ritual and belonging.”⁷² The emergence of the buffered self in opposition to the porous self opened the door to a more horizontal, individual, rational self-understanding, which helped spur on the Great Disembedding from social and cosmic forces of belonging that had previously defined the boundaries of the self. We can trace the impact of

69. Taylor, 60.

70. Taylor, 146.

71. Taylor, 151.

72. Taylor, 156.

this changing makeup of the self from “enchanted” times to the secular age. The themes that emerge in this evolution, such as rationalization and individualization, would continue to define the contours of discussion about religion, and shed light on the religious/secular binary that would emerge.

Social Imaginaries

As the individual became disembedded from more communal understandings of the self, a new social imaginary would start to take hold that would prioritize unbelief and make it part of “common sense.” But it is important to briefly outline what Taylor means by social imaginaries, as well as the closely related concept of an immanent and closed frame that results from the dominant social imaginary. Taylor differentiates a “social imaginary” from a “theory” – the former denotes for him a much larger and more comprehensive context of experience and thought. He states:

I want to speak of “social imaginary” here, rather than social theory, because there are important differences between the two. There are, in fact, several differences. I speak of “imaginary” (i) because I’m talking about the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc. But it is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.⁷³

According to Taylor, theories hold an element of elitism and parochialism that render them inaccessible to a large portion of the population. In his view, social imaginaries can contain and shape social theories as well as practices. While he acknowledges that “it is the practice that

73. Taylor, 170-1.

largely carries the understanding,"⁷⁴ Taylor's primary focus of analysis is on the imaginary that allows for the said practice to exist. For him, secularism has become the "background" against which we perceive our everyday lives. As he states, "The background which makes sense of any given act is thus wide and deep. It doesn't include everything in our world, but the relevant sense-giving features can't be circumscribed; and because of this we can say that sense-giving draws on our whole world, that is, our sense of our whole predicament in time and space, among others and in history."⁷⁵ We can see clearly how a social imaginary is not bound to a particular theory in a particular place but encompasses "sense-giving features" which can be universalized. There seems to be some truth to Taylor's assertion that secularism is a powerful social imaginary which has become a part of the background of our everyday lives, whether or not we are aware of it. Even in spaces where religious attitudes exist, they are made amenable to secular goals. While the influence of institutionalized forms of traditional religions is on the decline, new forms of spirituality are on the rise. Later on, we will delve into Habermas' view of the public sphere, where religious attitudes must be "translated" for a wider secular audience. These kinds of compromises support Taylor's view that secularism has become the defining social imaginary of our time.

For my purpose, Taylor's description of a social imaginary is useful in showcasing the emergence of what he calls the "modern theory of moral order." The gradual amalgamation of certain values that would become part of the background of "secularism" is pertinent to understanding the binary between religion/secularism as it exists today. As Taylor explains, the

74. Taylor, 173.

75. Taylor, 174.

process of evolution from one social imaginary to another is complex and involves co-constitution with social practices: “In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones, but often transformed by the contact. This is crucial to what I called... the extension of the understanding of moral order. It couldn’t have become the dominant view in our culture without this penetration/ transformation of our imaginary.”⁷⁶ Taylor describes the three defining features of the new modern social order as being the new idea of a public sphere distinct from authority in which ideas can be debated, the market economy which establishes everyone as free economic agents and the horizontal, direct-access nature of modern political citizenship.⁷⁷ As these ideas were gradually taken up by people and incorporated into practices, the new social imaginary solidified as both an ideological and material reality, to the point where today it is difficult to imagine anything otherwise. An underlying theme of the new moral code is the emphasis on individual reason and autonomy, in line with European Enlightenment ideals, especially as concretized by political and social liberalism. Although events such as the Enlightenment and scientific revolution helped spur on the new modern social order of secularism, Taylor takes pains to not show it as a causal effect of these events or theories, instead showing it to be a multifaceted phenomenon reflecting a wide-ranging change in the imaginaries of a large population of people.

Closely related to Taylor’s concept of a social imaginary is that of the “immanent order/frame” to describe our current moral order. As he says,

76. Taylor, 175.

77. Taylor, 188-210.

Not only is the immanent frame itself not usually, or even mainly a set of beliefs which we entertain about our predicament, however it may have started out; rather it is the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs; but in the same way, one or other of these takes on the immanent frame, as open or closed, has usually sunk to the level of such an unchallenged framework, something we have trouble often thinking ourselves outside of, even as an imaginative exercise.⁷⁸

According to Taylor, the modern immanent frame can be “spun” as a “closed world structure,” to prevent challenges to the framework. While the possibility of an open world structure exists, there are “spins” on the current order which usually dictate a closed perspective and which keep intact the imaginary of Western modern secularism. As will be discussed later, Taylor gives the example of the academy as an institutional site where the closed world perspective may prevail so that Western secularism becomes a hegemonic framework which becomes difficult to challenge. After having laid the groundwork for Taylor’s all-encompassing view of a social imaginary, I will examine and interrogate two dominant features of modern secularism which have come to form the backbone of the secular/religious binary – the importance of humanism and reason. I will argue that the alignment of these concepts with secularism has led to the replication of a binary in the current literature on religious agency, where ideas of feminism and rationality are the exclusive domain of secularism and are thus not a part of religious women’s agency.

Humanism

Understanding the role of what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism” is integral to the project of secularism. As he explains, it was the existence of alternative codes of morality that allowed for secularism to take hold, and not just the subtraction story version of shedding

78. Taylor, 549.

unnecessary attributes to go “back” to an essential core of humanness that is secular and rational. As Taylor offers, “A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people. This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism.”⁷⁹ As he described earlier, a defining feature of the modern moral order is an equalization process by which economic, political, and social horizons become accessible for all instead of being entrenched in rigid structures. As in Immanuel Kant’s famous dictum “Sapere aude,” the individual is vested with the ability and courage to use her reason to make autonomous decisions. Whereas pre-modern living involved a social and material embeddedness in societal and cosmic hierarchies, modern life allows for the goals and interests of humanity to take precedence. The new exclusive humanism of modernity is differentiated from Christian and ancient ethics in which the reference to a higher authority is implicitly contained. As Taylor points out, human flourishing in Christianity is a paradoxical concept – it is to be sought not as an end in itself, but to embody God’s will in order to reach others and bring them towards the faith.⁸⁰ But the notion of “agape,” or spiritual love, is adapted to a universal scope in the new “exclusive humanism.” As Colin Grant explains, “agape” is “understood as the overflowing of divine plenitude.... It is essentially God reaching out to humanity, providing the assurance and inspiration that accounts for any love that we might express.”⁸¹ The inner duty to God to spread goodwill loses the reference point of God in the modern adaptation and becomes a duty of

79. Taylor, 19.

80. Taylor, 18.

81. Colin Grant, “For the Love of God: Agape,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2015): 4.

beneficence to all simply for the sake of humanity. This is what Taylor emphasizes in his discussion of the exclusivity of the new kind of humanism that becomes prevalent in the period of secularism. He says, “There is a specific drive to beneficence in modern humanist moral psychology, independent of pre-existing ties. Its scope is in principle universal. This is the historical trace, as it were, of agape.”⁸² But while the roots of agape were based in divine love, the origins of exclusive humanism are in human nature and psychology. If, as the subtraction story suggests, we are all secular and rational at our core, then shedding the layers of transcendent meaning allows a more meaningful, unmediated relationship of beneficence with others. Or, as Taylor sums up, “We only needed to get these perverse and illusory condemnations off our back, and the value of ordinary human desire shines out, in its true nature, as it has always been.”⁸³ Indeed, the “natural” inner motivation towards beneficence becomes one of the two main features of the new humanism that emerges.

a) *Beneficence*

Beneficence that is rooted in human nature, as opposed to a transcendent authority, is justified using two related paradigms – one is related to natural sympathy and compassion, and the other is related to a disciplined and disengaged reason that can universalize goodwill. Both impetuses towards goodness are rooted in human nature and are cast as immanent, or devoid of supernatural motivation. As elucidated by thinkers such as Johann Herder and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, there is an innate propensity towards charity and benevolence that can be harnessed for the secular Enlightenment project of human advancement.⁸⁴ While human desire and

82. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 247.

83. Taylor, 253.

84. Taylor, 344.

emotions were discouraged or limited in the pre-modern life of embeddedness and social/religious obligation, they are now recast as necessary manifestations of human nature. As Taylor reiterates, modern secular understandings of humanism involve a “rehabilitation of ordinary, untransformed human desire and self-love, previously seen as an obstacle to universal justice/benevolence, which now is cast either as innocent, or as a positive force for good.”⁸⁵ Yet I will argue that the view of innate sympathy and compassion is largely dependent on the disciplining process of “natural” reason to reach its full potential.

While there is a new appreciation for ordinary human desire and sympathy, it is overshadowed by the legacy of Enlightenment reason as the defining feature of both exclusive humanism, and modern secular man. Even our natural goodness must be tamed by reason to achieve full human flourishing. As Taylor explains, “If living up to my dignity as a rational being involves acting for universal beneficence and justice, then a bent to these must be part of what rationality requires, part of what a rational agent finds in herself as a defining feature. There is no way around it.”⁸⁶ If we recall the subtraction story explanation of modernity, a refining of man and removal of unnecessary layers allows man to emerge as a beacon of reason, capable of self-determination and autonomy. It is not natural goodness that propels modern people to be rational, but rationality that guides them to be good and beneficent. This is achieved

through a strong sense of the powers of disengaged instrumental reason, whose dispassionate impersonality was taken as sufficient for universal beneficence.... The idea is advanced that disengaged reason itself, by freeing us from enmiring in our own narrow perspective, and allowing us a view of the whole, must kindle the desire to serve that whole. The impartial spectator will be by this very fact benevolent; seeing what the greatest happiness would amount to, he wants to encompass it.⁸⁷

85. Taylor, 253.

86. Taylor, 250.

87. Taylor, 249-50.

Taylor shows the change that occurs in modern moral theory – an appropriate use of a pared down, disengaged version of reason allowed the articulation of a robust moral capacity for generosity and beneficence for others. The secular revision of agape, or the expression of divine abundance, involves its taming by reason; man needs to remove himself from his instinctive investments in order to then insert himself back into a position of hospitality and generosity. Kant is perhaps best known for his deontological view of morality in which a priori reason can be used to reach universal laws. According to him, the categorical imperative must be drawn from the following three premises: it must be universal (so not drawn from experience), humanity must be represented as an end in itself and the will of every rational being must be capable of giving itself the universal law by acting “according to the maxim that can make itself at the same time a universal law.”⁸⁸ Here, we can see that through a strict process of self-discipline, by removing all subjective/sensory experience, each individual can reach a universal law of goodwill towards others. As Taylor illustrates, in place of a supreme transcendental authority we have a moral theory based on reason:

Another way of immanentizing moral power was through a sense of a pure, universal will, an inner power before which we stand in awe, as with Kant. This is a close relation to the disengaged reason I have just described, except that the source of benevolence is not the width of things surveyed. It is rather that the very power to act by universal law is an object of wonder and infinite respect. Kant invokes in the same breath “the starry skies above, and the moral law within.” It is this which lifts and inspires us to rise to the full demands of justice and benevolence.⁸⁹

88. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, eds. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48.

89. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 48-9.

It is noteworthy to see the transformation of notions of the sublime and reverent from an all-powerful God to the supreme potential of reason.

How are we to understand these two paradoxical sources of human beneficence in the modern age? While one source is our inner well of sympathy, the other is an enlightened and regimented moulding of this core through a universal form of reason. Taylor presents two possible ways to understand this apparently contradictory perspective of human nature. On one hand, some thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition have attempted to synthesize the two views. For example, while Kant distinguishes between the noumenal (practical) and phenomenal (speculative) worlds, he places ethics in the former, along with other metaphysical entities such as God and the soul, thus attempting to recognize the importance of both realms. Other thinkers who followed in the same tradition, such as John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx would also combine aspects of natural human sympathy/emotion with forms of rational consciousness.⁹⁰ Another way to understand the two sources of benevolence are in a more dialectical fashion, whereby both disengaged reason and innate sympathy inform each other to define exclusive humanism. As Taylor describes an experience of self-realization, “The discovery of what I really am within is made possible by the resonance I feel with the great current of nature outside of me.”⁹¹ In this formulation, the phenomenological experience draws from both inner currents of instinct as well as an objective awareness of the outside world. Hence the aspect of beneficence which is one integral component of exclusive humanism can be said to arise from a natural capability for sympathy, as well as for reason.

90. Taylor, 257.

91. Taylor, 344.

b) *Agency/Autonomy*

While beneficence is the other-directed aspect of exclusive humanism, the idea of individual agency and autonomy is the self-directed aspect of an immanent humanism. Agency represents the individual capacity for freedom and choice to live a meaningful life. Autonomy carries similar connotations of freedom and moral and societal independence. Kant's philosophy perhaps best exemplifies Enlightenment thought about the necessity for autonomy, and is worth quoting: "*Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!*"⁹² Here, Kant expresses in strong terms the moral requirement for each individual to emerge from their "self-incurred" immaturity to embrace their own autonomy as rational creatures. Heteronomy, or dependence on another, is a failure of courage if it is done knowingly. With his bold proclamation of the Latin "*Sapere aude,*" Kant sketches the horizons of modernity with his emphasis on individual autonomy, based in reason. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant elucidates on autonomy as a requirement for universal legislation and a "kingdom of ends," or a hypothetical state of existence in which rational beings use reason to reach moral ends. He states that "autonomy is thus the ground of the dignity of a human and of every rational nature"⁹³ since without the ability to use reason to deliberate about himself and the world, Kant's kingdom of

92. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1. Original italics.

93. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 48.

ends cannot exist. Although Kant's conceptualization of autonomy attempts to reach a "pure reason" that is not polluted by internal or external biases, the close alignment of autonomy and Enlightenment with "public use of one's reason" showcases reason as opposing tradition and external forms of authority. Taylor agrees that normative views on human agency underwent a transformation in the modern period as secularization emerged, although these changes are often subsumed into the "background" or social imaginary and so are not perceived as fundamental shifts in thought.⁹⁴ He quotes Alain Renaut, who states:

Fundamentally, humanism is the conception and valorization of humanity in its capacity for autonomy.... What constitutes modernity is the fact that man thinks of himself as the source of his representations and acts, as their foundation (subject) or their author.... The man of humanism is the one who no longer receives his norms and laws either from the nature of things (Aristotle) nor from God, but who establishes them himself on the basis of his reason and will.⁹⁵

Individual autonomy came to take on a significant role in conceptualizations of modern secularism, as reason dethroned God as the moral bulwark and compass.

An illustration of a comprehensive ethical framework in which autonomy is given expression in the context of exclusive humanism is existentialism. Although existential philosophy first emerged in the 19th century, it gained popularity as a movement after World War II through the writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. In his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre counters objections to his philosophy and lays out reasons why existentialism can be considered a form of humanism that promotes the flourishing of man and society, and that does not find its justification in a transcendental God. While Kant proposed an

94. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 590.

95. Alain Renaut, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity*, trans. M. B. De Bevoise and Franklin Philip (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 19.

inner core of reason as the basis of moral laws, Sartre posits that there is no essence of man so he is ultimately responsible for creating his own moral code. Sartre states:

If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Hence, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.⁹⁶

While existentialism is commonly misunderstood as promoting nihilism, Sartre counters that it can lead to an individual ethic of responsibility, that is also attuned to the greater needs of man. Each decision also represents a legislating of that choice to all of mankind and must be made with this realization in mind.⁹⁷ While Kant supposed the basis of a priori reason as the source of universal legislation for his kingdom of ends, Sartre asserts an existential self-legislation as the basis for a better world – or what he calls “an ethic of action and self-commitment.”⁹⁸ Sartre explains why he labels his philosophy an “existential humanism”: “This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realize himself as truly human.”⁹⁹ We can see here how his philosophy is aligned with humanist goals of self-flourishing and happiness, without any metaphysical component. Instead of man turning inwards towards a nihilism or an inner spirituality, existentialism seeks self-realization outside of himself, in the world of humanity.

96. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” marxists.org, Marxists Internet Archive, February 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>, 3.

97. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” 4.

98. Sartre, 9.

99. Sartre, 14.

Although Sartre would later come to part ways with Kantian philosophy, here he seems to agree with Kant's "kingdom of ends," or an ideal state of man in which each lives according to his moral code, and this leads to an improved state of humanity. Sartre further explains his view of God as being irrelevant to the premise of existentialist philosophy:

Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action.¹⁰⁰

The sense of existentialism supporting "exclusive" humanism is evident; while the existence of God is not ruled out altogether, it ceases to play a decisive role in human decisions and progress. As Sartre states, the (non)existence of God is irrelevant to man's inner morality and goodness – "nothing can save him from himself." Similar to Kant, Sartre believes that relying on external authorities takes man away from his inner self and autonomy – if man "is to find himself again," he will be able to forge an ethical code for himself that is also universalizable. Unlike Kant, Sartre's moral code is not based on an innate core of reason but on individual responsibility and commitment to action (existence before essence). Interestingly, Sartre calls his philosophy "optimistic" because of the certainty related to self-conduct in the absence of transcendental dictates and the propensity towards action, countering objections to existentialism being pessimistic or nihilistic. Existentialist ethics, as well as Kantian ethics, are holistic moral systems articulated outside God's purview which aim to enhance human autonomy. Although both these systems elide transcendental scope, neither rules out the

100.Sartre, 14.

existence of God – for Kant, God is unknowable through understanding so cannot be a part of his universal moral framework. Sartre, as well, thinks the question of the existence of God is irrelevant to his ethics. Hence, both fit well within Taylor’s scope of exclusive humanism.

I have thus far expounded on two different aspects of exclusive humanism – beneficence towards others and autonomy. I have roughly sketched the transformation of these values from their religious articulations to a view of other and self-directed goodness as originating in the self and humanity. Beneficence has been shown to originate from sympathy and compassion but needs to be regulated by innate reason. Autonomy can be based in various ethical systems that universalize an inner impetus towards doing good to oneself and others. As Taylor shows, the existence of the alternative of a robust notion of humanism was vital to the emergence of secularism as a social imaginary. Although events such as the Enlightenment and scientific revolution did significantly alter our intellectual horizons, these changes would not have concretized without the option of exclusive humanism. He states: “What was needed before these “facts” could bear scientific fruit were two things, the availability of alternative frameworks, and the waning of the hold of the older cosmos ideas on the imagination.”¹⁰¹ Exclusive humanism as an alternative framework allowed for secular ideas to take hold within the modern imagination. But as Taylor points out, the modern social imaginary belies its own myths and irrationality – there is “the possibility that Western modernity might be powered by its own positive visions of the good, that is, by one constellation of such visions among available others, rather than by the only viable set left after the old myths and legends have been

101. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 328.

exploded.”¹⁰² The subtraction story underlying stories of secular modernity implies that once all external impediments and layers have been removed from man, his natural affinity will be towards rational secularism. Taylor points out that this teleology of “progress” is certainly not in itself rational or inevitable and may carry its own mythological character. Other authors have also pointed out the tendency of Enlightenment thought to contain a kernel of “corrosive rationality” and myth which can lead to domination and fascism.¹⁰³ It is imperative to interrogate the particular “positive vision of the good” that has become naturalized in modern secularism to see its basis in political, economic and social conditions, as well as larger projects of capitalism¹⁰⁴ and colonialism.¹⁰⁵ This can then shed light on its intrinsic biases and its discontents. Taylor goes on to critique the modern secular myth that “people behave as individuals, because that’s what they ‘naturally’ do when no longer held in by the old religions, metaphysics and customs, though this may be seen as a glorious liberation, or a purblind enmiring in egoism, depending on our perspective. What it cannot be seen as is a novel form of moral self-understanding, not definable simply by the negation of what preceded it.”¹⁰⁶ According to Taylor, the assumptions of secularism lack a rigorous self-conceptualization; its assertion of an ontological basis of man is flawed. Hence, Taylor critiques the modern secular imaginary as lacking a solid foundation, while it presents itself as a “novel form of moral self-understanding.” For Taylor, even the concept of exclusive humanism is riven with contradictions due to the nature of its emergence based on a hollow secularism. He states, “It

102. Taylor, 571.

103. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4.

104. Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 85.

105. Lloyd, “Introduction,” 17; Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Other-wise?” 287

106. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 571.

appears that the religious or spiritual identity of masses of people still remains defined by religious forms from which they normally keep themselves at a good distance.”¹⁰⁷ According to Taylor, many people today who profess secular values are still working against the background of religion and are defined by it (just as many who are “religious” are also influenced by and interacting with secularism). He gives examples of modern spiritual practices that manifests themselves in a variety of ways, such as meditation, charitable work, pilgrimages and even rock concerts, in which people seek transcendence, or a feeling of sublimity in which they are carried away from themselves into something larger, even momentarily.¹⁰⁸ While the exclusive humanism that undergirds the project of secularism is imperfect, it is a defining feature of the modern social imaginary. This will be important when I discuss the literature on religious women’s agency in the next chapter. Because secularism is so deeply intertwined with notions of humanism, it becomes difficult to also understand religious women as capable of humanistic and feminist ideals. In effect, a false binary is set up where secularism is equated with human flourishing and rationality and religion is associated with women’s oppression and irrationality.

Reason

Rationality is a defining feature of secular thought. Various aspects of this have been discussed already, such as the secular myth of the “subtraction story,” in which the modern secular human sheds the heavy layers of authority to reach an inner core that is rational and secular. With this teleology, reason is naturalized as an integral characteristic of secular individuals; religion, therefore, is assumed to occupy the opposite role of irrationality and

107. Taylor, 521.

108. Taylor, 518.

artificiality. The construction of humanism that is vital to secularism is also guided by the mitigation of our natural sympathy through a disciplined reason that leads to beneficence towards others. Perhaps the most extensive and comprehensive use of reason that has contributed to secularism is the ethical system of Kant which is guided by each individual's capacity to use his natural reason to attain universal moral guidelines. As Taylor points out, the conceptualization of reason in secular thought is a peculiar version of reason that portrays itself as universal and has become part of our social imaginary. As he explicates, "A certain awe still surrounds reason as a critical power, capable of liberating us from illusion and blind forces of instinct, as well as the phantasies bred of our fear and narrowness and pusillanimity. The nearest thing to fullness lies in this power of reason, and it is entirely ours, developed if it is through our own, often heroic action."¹⁰⁹ Today, reason has taken on many different forms, from bureaucratic reason¹¹⁰ to technological reason,¹¹¹ but we continue to defer to reason as the source of, and guide to, our moral and practical well-being (this chapter itself uses a rational method). The modern secular individual prizes herself on his ability to sift through the murky waters of the metaphysical world and muddled feelings to become an emancipated and rational individual. Although the critique of Enlightenment reason is an ongoing project taken on by many, including feminists, non-Western and Indigenous thinkers, socialists, phenomenologists and postcolonial thinkers, I seek to uncover the secular biases that abound in conceptualizations of reason that are commonplace today. Accordingly, I will also discuss the

109. Taylor, 9.

110. Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 245.

111. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 5.

secular bias present in the academy today, where reason is institutionalized and attains authority, and where the artificial binary of secular/religious is often constructed and reproduced. Debate around the role of reason in the public sphere shows the lingering importance of reason in matters of deliberation in secular spaces.

Drawing on Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, along with Connolly's critique and revision of Habermas' model, reason is shown as retaining paramount importance not just in the modern social imaginary, but as a benchmark of progress in public institutions. The influence of Enlightenment reason is evident in Habermas' theory, especially Kantian notions of universal progress through reason – in this case, the potential of reason in communicative rationality, or an ethics of discourse. Habermas explains the need for elaborating a pragmatic rational basis for social and political understanding among the diverse needs of citizens today, and the failure of traditional, or Western, philosophy in taking up this modern challenge:

The rationality of beliefs and actions is a theme usually dealt with in philosophy. One could even say that philosophical thought originates in reflection on the reason embodied in cognition, speech, and action; and reason remains its basic theme. From the beginning philosophy has endeavored to explain the world as a whole, the unity in the multiplicity of appearances, with principles to be discovered in reason – and not in communication.¹¹²

Two Habermasian themes emerge here in his justification for the necessity of a theory of communication – the paramount importance of reason that is a hallmark of Western political theory, and the need for universal values to unify discrete and multifarious human needs. While Kant promotes reason as providing the foundation for a universal moral framework, Habermas

112. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 48.

situates the capacity for reason in linguistic structures that enable humans to reach a universal standard of understanding that has resonances with Kant's "kingdom of ends." He thus proceeds to outline the theoretical basis for a "rational infrastructure of action oriented to reaching understanding"¹¹³ that can help bridge the apparently infinite babel that make up the public sphere. Habermas provides evidence for the need of a theory of communicative rationality based on both metatheoretical and methodological viewpoints that is built on a "concept of rationality [that] is unavoidably built into the action-theoretic foundations of sociology."¹¹⁴ While it is difficult in this short space to expand on the details of his theory of communicative rationality, the following suffices to give an overview of its details, and his reliance on reason as the basis for his sophisticated ethical code based on speech and mutual deliberation:

We have, by way of anticipation, characterized the rational internal structure of processes of reaching understanding in terms of (a) the three world-relations of actors and the corresponding concepts of the objective, social, and subjective worlds; (b) the validity claims of propositional truth, normative rightness, and sincerity or authenticity; (c) the concept of a rationally motivated agreement, that is, one based on the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims; and (d) the concept of reaching understanding as the cooperative negotiation of common definitions of the situation.¹¹⁵

From this overview, it is evident that rationality is embedded into his theory at the individual, social and objective levels and can lead to mutual collaboration and understanding. For him, the manifestation of a rightly-guided reason is the creation of a more just and harmonious society – this is a more pragmatic code for universal conduct than Kant's ideal of universal laws that each gives to oneself through the categorical imperative.

113. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 165.

114. Habermas, 198.

115. Habermas, 198.

Habermas' communicative rationality is an important concept to grasp to understand the way that Enlightenment reason continues to dominate discussions of public debate. It also sheds light on his problematic view of the scope of religion in public institutions. In "Religion in the Public Sphere," he states, "The democratic procedure owes its legitimizing power to two components: first, the equal political participation of all citizens, which ensures that the addressees of the laws can also understand themselves to be the authors of these laws; and, second, the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes."¹¹⁶ Haber shows the influence of communicative rationality as the neutral institutional ground upon which consensus can be reached by citizens of a liberal state. But Habermas acknowledges that the secular character of the public sphere may present problems for religious individuals who wish to participate. The state should not expect religious citizens to undergo "an artificial division within their own minds"¹¹⁷ in order be intelligible within secular spaces. He acknowledges that living a religious life involves a thorough commitment to live by its ethos: "Genuine faith is not merely a doctrine, something believed, but is also a source of energy that the person of faith taps into performatively to nurture her whole life."¹¹⁸ Habermas proposes what he sees as a compromise that may allow religious individuals to express themselves in secular public institutions without resorting a form of cognitive dissonance, or internal division:

Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold separating the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations. This only calls for the epistemic ability to consider one's

116. Jurgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the 'Public Use of Reason' by Religious and Secular Citizens," 121.

117. Habermas, 127.

118. Habermas, 127.

own religious convictions reflexively from the outside and to connect them with secular views. Religious citizens can certainly acknowledge this “institutional translation proviso” without having to split their identity into public and private parts the moment they participate in public discourses. They should therefore also be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language even when they cannot find secular “translations” for them.¹¹⁹

Habermas insists on a distinction between the “informal” religious sphere and the institutional secular sphere where politics is actualized and decisions are made. Even while acknowledging the all-encompassing nature of living religiously, he believes this his “institutional translation proviso” (adapted from John Rawls), provides adequate conceptual space for religious individuals to retain their faith while participating in the public sphere. The cognitive requirement to objectively “translate” one’s religious convictions into a secular language can be carried out without dissolving into cognitive dissonance, and if a translation is difficult, religious language must be accommodated by the secular state. While Habermas’ compromise seems reasonable, keeping in mind his condition of “deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes,” it places the burden of translation on religious individuals. While nonreligious citizens must also “open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues,”¹²⁰ the onus is on religious citizens to acquiesce to the demands of the secular state. Habermas explains that the requirement of translation is in the interest of religious individuals and serves the greater good of a deliberative, rational society:

Citizens of a democratic polity owe one another good reasons for their political positions. Even if the religious contributions are not subjected to self-censorship, they depend on cooperative acts of translation. For without a successful translation the substantive content of religious voices has no prospect of being taken up into the

119.Habermas, 130.

120.Habermas, 132.

agendas and negotiations within political bodies and of gaining a hearing in the broader political process.¹²¹

If an asymmetrical responsibility is not placed on religious individuals to inculcate a cognitive sensibility towards secular discourse, their voices will effectively be unheard in the public sphere. It is useful to recall Habermas' views regarding communicative rationality, in which "those who wish to come to an understanding have to suppose that there are common standards in the light of which participants can decide whether a consensus has been reached."¹²² It appears as if Habermas' association of rationality with secularism sets up an institutional barrier to the intelligibility of religious discourse in public life.

Connolly seeks to critique notions of rationality in the public sphere which do not also acknowledge the importance of non-rational components of the self that are also implicated in all decisions, whether private or public. He expounds on the importance of the "visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity" which can lead to a fuller understanding of our human condition and its role in cooperative enterprises:

The visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, as I will call it, is at once part of thinking, indispensable to more conceptually refined thinking, a periodic spur to creative thinking, and a potential impediment to rethinking. The visceral register, moreover, can be drawn upon to thicken an intersubjective ethos of generous engagement between diverse constituencies or to harden strife between partisans. It can be and do all these things, and others besides. And yet modern secularism – in the main and for the most part – either ignores this register or disparages it. It does so in the name of a public sphere in which reason, morality and tolerance flourish.¹²³

While Habermas' notion of the public sphere had a limited role for religious individuals due to the dominance of secular discourse, Connolly opens the door to a more varied and nuanced

121.Habermas, 132.

122.Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 172.

123.Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 3.

inclusion of religious citizens based on different universal human capabilities situated in instinct, feeling, or spirituality. He critiques modern secularism for an overemphasis on reason to the detriment of the other layers of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity that can lead to creativity and generosity between citizens. Interestingly, Connolly traces the genealogy of secular reason to forms of “dogmatic ecclesiology.” Kantian reason, as well as neo-Kantian and secular forms of reason, seek to displace religious dogmatism with a more objective and universal moral code, but replicate a similar structure of authority. As Connolly outlines, Kant’s “rational religion” elevates a singular conception of reason as superior, it posits this reason in the political sphere as authoritative and in the process of doing so, it delegitimizes other perspectives.¹²⁴ Connolly also implicates Habermas in continuing the Kantian tradition of legitimizing a dogmatic form of reason in the public sphere, for fear that lack of rational authority will lead to political chaos and disorder.¹²⁵ He seeks to broaden the horizon of acceptable discourse by revising the Kantian and Habermasian commitment to rational authority:

How might emendation of the secular be pursued? Such an attempt seems to require a series of revisions in secular simulations of public argumentation. In place of the Habermasian ideal of a consensus between rational agents who rise above their interests and sensibilities, you might substitute that of *ethically sensitive, negotiated settlements* between chastened partisans who proceed from contending and overlapping presumptions while *jointly* coming to appreciate the unlikelihood of reaching rational agreement on several basic issues; in place of a *reduction* of public discourse to pure argument, you might appreciate *positive possibilities in the visceral register of thinking and discourse too*, exploring how this dimension of subjectivity and intersubjectivity is indispensable to creativity in thinking, to the introduction of new

124. Connolly, 32.

125. Connolly, 38-9.

identities onto the cultural register of legitimacy, and to the possibility of contingent settlements in public life.¹²⁶

According to Connolly's vision of an ameliorated space of public discourse, an oversimplified reliance on reason gives way to the cultivation of an ethical sensibility that is open to different perspectives, even if they are not secular or rational. Organizing the public sphere must mean that individuals feel free to bring their different "registers" to the table, and that compromise must be a cornerstone, instead of rational authority of the kind Habermas advocates for. By analyzing Habermas' conception of communicative rationality and showing its Kantian origins, as well as his view of the limited role of religion in the public sphere, we can appreciate Taylor's critique that the modern social imaginary is predominantly secular and is premised on a notion of rationality that is both natural and inculcated in political life. In addition, Connolly's critique traces the "dogmatic" use of morality from religion that is replicated in views of authoritative rationality in the secular space. He points out the gaps in a conception of the public sphere which does not allow for the human capacity for feelings and instinct, qualities which can allow engagement with more varied issues. Furthermore, he charges secularists with also bringing their own baggage, or metaphysical and religious perspectives, to political decision-making, but denying doing so.¹²⁷ Through this discussion of the limitations and gaps of an authoritative form of rationality in the public sphere, it is evident that reason is closely aligned with secularism, both in the social imaginary and in public institutions. I will now turn to the academy as a specific institution in which unreflexive constructions of the secular are constructed and promoted.

126. Connolly, 35-6. Original italics.

127. Connolly, 37.

Knowledge/Power in the Academy

Thus far, I have discussed the emergence of secularism mostly as an ideology – or, as Taylor states, the “context of understanding” in which secularism was able to replace religion as the dominant social imaginary.¹²⁸ Elaborating on the concept of reason and its relationship with secularism in the public sphere has allowed me to examine this connection in an institutional context. Finally, an interrogation of the dissemination of secularism in a specific institution – the academy – can show how knowledge production is ridden with biases and power differentials. By showing that the binary of secularism/religion is also endemic to the academy, I situate the literature on Muslim women’s agency within recent works on religion in political theory/anthropology and examine it for any underlying biases.

The academy is not a neutral institution of knowledge production – it can be complicit, at a structural and theoretical level, in reproducing the oppressions of society that academics profess to tackle. As Paulo Ravecca poignantly points out, “Academia, critical or not, is structurally implicated in power relations (and domination) in many ways –again, good intentions, when uninformed, are powerless and even dangerous.... I am not talking only about the theory that we produce, but also about the mechanics of academia.”¹²⁹ The “good intentions” of academics in pursuing truth or social change can blind them to the ways that the hierarchies replicated within universities can reproduce problematic power inequalities. These hierarchies can be at the institutional level as well as at the level of discourse. Theories, as well,

128. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

129. Paulo Ravecca, *The Politics of Political Science: Re-Writing Latin American Experiences* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 33.

can be complicit in being parochial or elitist, often becoming removed from the object of study, or the larger social world. Ravecca points out the need to incorporate intellectual projects into social contexts: “The core theoretical perspective, regarding academia and social sciences, is that knowledge production is a key component of the broader social relations in which it occurs. Given that knowledge and theory do not lie “outside power” it follows that any conception or assessment of the political has political implications.”¹³⁰ Being cognizant of the impact of research on communities can encourage intellectuals to strive for more self-reflexivity and responsibility in their work. Especially for research in the social sciences, academics must take care not to replicate any asymmetries from their social worlds.

The discussion of power gestures to other kinds of inequalities related to knowledge production. As Foucault reminds us, knowledge-making is always imbued with processes of power and thus has the potential to dominate individuals. According to Foucault, power can be found in different facets of life and produces various effects: “Power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects.”¹³¹ The process of becoming a subject can either be an imposition from above, or a form of self-subjectivization through “conscience or self-knowledge.” For Foucault, knowledge is inherently linked with power: “Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power.... It is not possible for

130. Ravecca, *The Politics of Political Science*, 33.

131. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994), 331.

power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.”¹³² We can see that he emphatically outlines the co-dependence of knowledge production with forces of power – but what of the university, as the locus of dissemination of knowledge? According to Foucault, the academy breeds a particular kind of structure of power, or an “apparatus of truth”:

The intellectual can operate and struggle at the general level of that regime of truth which is so essential to the structure and functioning of our society. There is a battle “for truth,” or at least “around truth” – it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean “the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted,” but rather “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true,” it being understood also that it's not a matter of a battle “on behalf” of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.¹³³

The intellectual becomes a figure of “truth,” imbued with authority, and a conduit for power, with real implications in the social world. It is significant that the truth values embodied by the intellectual are not empirical facts but what he calls “regimes of truth” which subjugate individuals through their authoritative capacity for power.

Edward Said is another thinker who highlights the power dynamics behind processes of knowledge production. Instead of regimes of truth replicated within institutions, he shows that any pretense of objectivity in intellectual endeavours belies specific political and social commitments. If there is no such thing as neutral knowledge production, the fact that the West has historically possessed the material power to dictate the direction of global intellectual pursuits presents a problematic cultural divide. He calls orientalism a “Western style for

132. Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 52.

133. Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994), 132.

dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹³⁴ Along with an epistemological critique about the possibility of intellectual objectivity, his is a cultural critique about what kinds of knowledge can be produced and reproduced in Western (Occidental) and non-Western (Oriental) locations. He makes the following intervention to practices of academia: “For Orientalism brings one up directly against [the] question – that is, to realizing that political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions – in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility.”¹³⁵ Both Foucault and Said outline the dynamics of power inherent in the academy that can call into question the neutrality and universality of academic research. The elitism that can be rampant in the academy is not only situated in power relations at the institutional and theoretical level, but also at the cultural and epistemological level as a “regime of truth.” A closer entwinement of the academy with the social world, and of theory with praxis, can help remediate some of the problems associated with elitism. The practice of self-reflection, as well, can help academics be accountable to the larger community and to be aware of unintended violence that can arise from their scholarship.¹³⁶

A discussion of the neoliberal entanglements of the academy can also shed some light on *external* sources of power that can influence research and can pose further ethical questions about the status of the academy as the center for knowledge production par excellence. As Jeremiah Morelock states, “The University is rapidly shedding away every trace of aims and

134. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 3.

135. Said, *Orientalism*, 13-14.

136. Ravecca, *The Politics of Political Science*, 196.

values other than elitism, gatekeeping, skills-training and human capital acquisition.”¹³⁷ If neoliberalism can be described as “a political program that offers a vision of the good society guided by market values, or ostensible market rationality, from efficiency, to accountability, and to autonomy, and one that relies on *social, cultural, and discursive* interventions for the extension and dissemination of these values to all institutions and social action,”¹³⁸ then the neoliberal academy is one example of an institution that embodies market logic. Even global academic rankings of different post-secondary institutions that determine prestigious schools and attract funding for research are part of a web of commodification within global structures of neoliberalism.¹³⁹ Along with a generalized process of defunding and framing education as an individual product, there has been a “skillsification” of the university whereby all teachable topics are valued as a skill that can be used in the market.¹⁴⁰ Education becomes instrumentalized as a strategic investment towards perpetuating market logic. Knowledge itself becomes a commodity and the process of education becomes alienating since the “product” we produce is given value through an external structure of neoliberal efficiency that is external to us. Herbert Marcuse cautions us about the academy replicating structures of “technological rationality,” a social condition in which “machine reason” and conformity become the dominant mode of social and intellectual life, emphasizing a one-dimensional rationality and efficiency.

137. Jeremiah Morelock, “Why Philosophical Method Matters for Society: Marcuse on Dialectical vs. Formal Logic” (presentation, International Herbert Marcuse Society Conference, Arizona State University, 2021), 5.

138. Veronica Schild, “Emancipation as Moral Regulation: Latin American Feminisms and Neoliberalism,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 550.

139. John Welsh, “‘Globalizing’ Academics? Ranking and Appropriation in the Transformations of the World-System,” *Globalizations* 17, no. 1 (July 2019): 1.

140. Mark Garrison, “Feeling Like a Robot: Origin, Critique and Alternative to ‘Social Emotional Learning,’” (meeting paper, 47th annual New York State Foundations of Education Association, New York, March 29-30, 2019), 3.

He states: “Theoretical and practical Reason, academic and social behaviorism meet on common ground: that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination.”¹⁴¹ From the perspective of global capitalism, the academy is not a neutral institution and, insofar as researchers also have material needs and are dependent on the economy, they must meet the demands of the neoliberal university. As Ravecca points out,

We (“progressive” scholars) are critical illusions in (neo)liberal structures. Postmodern and Marxist books are commodities too. Our writing is on sale. We, (“critical” scholars) also know about hierarchies and seniorities, dubious quotation practices, social capital reproduction, “interest group” dynamics and so on (not to speak about narcissism and the conflation between the center of the world and our arm chair). The brown scholar with an American-Canadian-UK passport and impeccable English profits from the communities that she claims to represent – no doubt, postcolonial studies also lack innocence. Critical scholars and progressives also have their “star system” of gods (and goddesses) that only travel in first class to deliver a talk about the revolution and who come, mostly, from American universities. All of this is “knowledge and power” too.¹⁴²

With poignant insights and biting sarcasm, Ravecca highlights that academics are complicit in some of the very struggles and oppressions we profess to counter with our research. No theory can guarantee immunity from replicating social inequalities and power relations that neoliberal commodification requires.

Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, also notes the connection between the capitalist class and the intellectuals as one of the base and superstructure within capitalist society, with intellectuals establishing and enforcing the values of the capitalist class (base). He notes that while intellectuals profess to be independent from the influence of the bourgeoisie, they only serve to function as its “functionaries.”¹⁴³ According to Gramsci, “The whole of

141. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 17-8.

142. Ravecca, *The Politics of Political Science*, 193.

143. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 144.

idealist philosophy can easily be connected with this position assumed by the social complex of intellectuals and can be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as ‘independent’, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc.”¹⁴⁴ The assumption of neutrality and independence is an idealist notion that denies the dialectical position of intellectuals within materialist capitalist society. Gramsci acknowledges that there is a degree of separation between intellectuals and the bourgeoisie class; nevertheless, the intellectuals play a large role in promoting capitalist values. He theorizes, “The relationship between the intellectuals and the world of production is not as direct as it is with the fundamental social groups but is, in varying degrees, ‘mediated’ by the whole fabric of society and by the complex of superstructures, of which the intellectuals are, precisely, the ‘functionaries.’”¹⁴⁵ As “functionaries,” intellectuals replicate ruling class values and disperse them within the cultural sphere. Instead of a passive role of transmitting values, intellectuals can also enforce the domination of the ruling bloc across society. These traditional intellectuals “are the dominant group’s “deputies” exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.” They can do this by ensuring the consent of the masses to the ruling class and through mechanisms of “legal” discipline on those who do not consent if a crisis of control arises.¹⁴⁶ In his astute analysis, Gramsci analyzes the role of the intellectual in any capitalist society. Today, if neoliberalism is the governing paradigm of this particular capitalist moment, then traditional intellectuals are complicit with the rule of the capitalist class and reproduce the neoliberal moment in the academy in various forms. Through an analysis of

144. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 138-9.

145. Gramsci, 144.

146. Gramsci, 145

how neoliberalism can present external controls on the academy and reproduce social and economic inequalities in broader capitalist society, we can further critique the academy and its supposed neutrality as the authoritative locus for producing innovative and engaged research.

The Secular Academy

The preceding analysis of dimensions of power and inequalities that permeate the academy allows me to interrogate the treatment of religion in the academy and unpack any biases that may exist. As we have seen, the emergence of secularism is ridden with holes and is defined only in opposition to religion. We have also seen that humanism and reason undergird the theoretical foundation of secularism, and that both have been emptied of any religious element. For exclusive humanism, self-directed and other-directed beneficence are legitimized without the mediation of God and in the public sphere, we see that secularism is connected to an authoritative rationality that severely limits any religious contributions. Since the academy produces and distributes knowledge in society, how does it reflect the social imaginary of secularism that is prevalent in it? Is there a similar emptying out of God from ideas of humanism and reason, and is the influence of religion significantly curtailed? These are questions I attempt to explore in what follows.

Secularism has become an overarching ideology within the academy. Taylor explains that secular ideas have become dominant in different spheres of life, some of them more influential than others: “The presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and

intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others.”¹⁴⁷ Taylor implies that because the academy is a part of mainstream society and serves to mould the intellectual perspectives of future academics, it has the potential to spread values of secularism across a broad spectrum of society. As mentioned earlier, Taylor describes the “immanent frame” as a concept closely related to the social imaginary; it is the background or context of our beliefs which is unquestioned and prevents the imagination of alternatives.¹⁴⁸ While the immanent frame can be “spun” as dictating either an open or closed perspective to new ideas, the current order of secularism represents a “closed” perspective in which “one’s thinking is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one seeing important aspects of reality.”¹⁴⁹ Taylor mentions the academy as a particularly important example of this because the “closed” spin is hegemonic. While the immanent frame can be spun in both ways, the closed perspective has become naturalized in the academy and “the sense that this reading is natural, logically unavoidable, underpins the power of the mainstream secularization theory, the view that modernity must bring secularity in its train.”¹⁵⁰ It is evident that Taylor holds the academy responsible for perpetuating secular values. Connolly also points out the influence of “card-carrying secularists” who “are very often university academics as well as citizens of the state” and who use their authority in both capacities to mutually benefit each other.¹⁵¹ He also implicates academic secularists with hypocritically “[purporting] to leave their religious and metaphysical baggage at home”¹⁵² while allowing it to impact their intellectual views. Both

147. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

148. Taylor, 549.

149. Taylor, 551.

150. Taylor, 550.

151. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 30.

152. Connolly, 37.

thinkers illustrate the uncritical nature of discourse in the academy, which reproduces secular values while professing to be neutral and open-minded. This can be seen through the reluctance of different disciplines to engage religion within the contours of their acceptable modes of writing. For example, the field of political science has traditionally resisted incorporating religion into analyses of politics.¹⁵³ Usually, religion is relegated to designated academic disciplines, such as religious studies instead of being amalgamated into broader teaching requirements and syllabi.

Wendy Brown makes a strong indictment of the secular bias of the academy in her introduction to *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*. By showing that the concepts of secularism and critique are not necessarily bound to each other, she opens space to understand why critique in the academy has become intertwined and dependent on secularism. She states: “The Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique, and that it is with this governance that we must begin. Unseating governance of this sort is the very signature of political, social, and cultural critique; it targets what is presumptive, sure, commonsensical, or given in the current order of things.”¹⁵⁴ In a meta-analysis of critique, she questions the given framework of secularism that has attained hegemony in the academy and associates this with a more “critical” form of critique with social implications. Citing “a constellation of Enlightenment conceits” which legitimize the dominance of secularism with

153. Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists?: Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 24; Eva Bellin, “Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics,” *World Politics* 60, no. 2 (2008); Kenneth Wald and Clyde Wilcox, “Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor? *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 4 (2006).

154. Wendy Brown, “Introduction,” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), 8.

reason and critique, she outlines Western philosophers who have associated reason, objectivity and science with the shedding of authority and especially religious influence (much as Taylor describes subtraction stories). According to Brown, this leads to “the conviction that critique displaces religious and other unfounded authority and prejudice with reason, even as it may leave religion itself standing. Hence too, the conviction that critique replaces opinion or faith with truth, and subjectivism with science; that critique is, in short, secular.”¹⁵⁵ This secularization, or *rationalization* of academic research can lead to the marginalization of religious insights and the devaluation of religious forms of agency. For example, the binary mentioned earlier that creates an artificial distinction between secularism/reason/humanism and religion/irrationality/oppression can be nurtured by this secular bias (this will be investigated further in Chapter 2). Significantly, Brown connects the secular bias of the academy with epistemological and political questions of imperialism and hegemony: “The question, is critique secular? is also posed at a political historical juncture when intellectuals face something of a choice between complicity with imperial and unreflexive Western civilizational discourses of rationality and secularism on the one hand, and with challenging Western presumptions to monopolize the fact, meaning, and content of secularism, rationalism, freedom, and even democracy on the other.”¹⁵⁶ The complicity of academics in narratives of imperialism must be interrogated from multiple perspectives; the paradigm of secularism, if it is uncritical about its origins and replication of oppressions in the social world, can be part and parcel of these narratives.

155. Brown, “Introduction,” 10-11.

156. Brown, 13.

As shown by Brown, academic discourse legitimates its secular bias through iteration and naturalization by Western academics in revered canons. For political theory, we can see that a host of codified thinkers from the Enlightenment onwards have legitimized secular values by associating religion with tradition and secularism with rationality. Kant (1724-1804) is perhaps the clearest proponent of secularism as a criterion of rationality. In his essay, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" he first presents the enduring distinction between the public use of reason and that of the "institution" of religion in the private sphere, in which reason must obey dictates and dogmas.¹⁵⁷ According to Kant, individuals must have "the courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another."¹⁵⁸ While autonomy can be reached by using one's natural reason courageously, it is constrained when man is dependent on any external authority. Religion presents one of the most severe restrictions on man's autonomy because "that form of immaturity is both the most pernicious and disgraceful of all"¹⁵⁹ due to its propensity for censorship and blind obedience. Moreover, the distinction between the "public" sphere where reason prevails and the "private" sphere of religion where reason is curtailed presents secularism (or lack of religion) as a rational enterprise upon which he can build his moral framework. Brown includes Georg Hegel (1770-1831) as another example of a Western political theorist who views religion as subservient to the history of reason.¹⁶⁰ Marx (1818 – 1883) also believes that religion is a social construct and that "the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism," and that it must be understood, but is

157. Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" 57.

158. Kant, 54.

159. Kant, 59.

160. Brown, "Introduction," 11.

also a symptom of alienation which must be transcended to achieve emancipation from economic oppression.¹⁶¹ Weber (1864-1920), in "Science as a Vocation," describes the "disenchantment" that is prevalent in the secular age and is critical of those who commit "intellectual sacrifice" by continuing to believe in religion. In condescending manner, he says, "To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he return silently.... The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him."¹⁶² In "The Subject and Power," Foucault (1926-1984) discusses "pastoral power" as a multifaceted "power technique" which originated within Christianity, and which exerts control and influence over people's conscience.¹⁶³ This form of power has evolved into a more sophisticated political form: "We can see the modern state as a modern matrix of individualization, or a new form of pastoral power."¹⁶⁴ Through a very cursory overview of the treatment of religion by these five thinkers who figure prominently in the canon of Western political theory, we can see that academic discourse is formed through the maintenance of the boundary between rationality and religion. While the first four thinkers are very critical about the role of religion in restricting reason (associated with freedom, or morality), Foucault aligns religion with a form of power that asserts control both institutionally (through the state) and individual conscience. If academic discourse sets the parameters of what is deemed worthy of research, it appears that for students of political theory, secularism is the reigning mode of conducting rational inquiry. If Brown's characterization of academic critique as necessarily secular is correct, then unseating

161. Karl Marx, "Introduction," *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marxists.org, Marxists Internet Archive, February 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.

162. Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 155.

163. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 332.

164. Foucault, 334.

its governance must involve an understanding of what secularism is, how it has emerged and its blind spots. The secular bias of the academy contributes to the limited depiction of religious women's motivations and capabilities, preventing a fuller understanding of their feminist agency.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to sketch a broad overview of the emergence of secularism and its various foundational instabilities and contradictions. I have discussed the external and internal Others of secularism, covering its temporal, geographic, cultural, racial and gendered divides. I have provided contextual details about secularization theory and secularism's imbrication with the concept of modernity. Through Taylor's concepts of the buffered self and social imaginaries, I have built a vocabulary with which to discuss secular phenomenon in literature as well as today's social context. Finally, unravelling the theoretical pillars undergirding secularism, I discussed how *humanism* (both other-directed and self-directed) and *reason* (especially in the public sphere) have had an enduring legacy for secularism today. A thorough analysis of power relations in the academy shows that it is not a neutral place for knowledge production, and many of the contradictions prevalent in secularism replicate themselves in the academy at the level of academic discourse, shown through theorists in the canon of political theory. This can have social and political implications for how religious individuals and groups are construed in academic discourse. In particular, the binary of secularism/reason/humanism vs. religion/irrational/oppression has negative repercussions in academic analyses of religious women's agency, as will be investigated in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 - Examining the Scope and Limitations of Pious Religious Agency

There is a plenitude of literature on the nature of religious women's agency. In this chapter, I will present a broad summary of some of this literature, after which I will place it within the contours of my discussion on secularism to show that it retains a secular bias in which religiosity = irrationality/oppression. By juxtaposing the work of Abu-Lughod, Mahmood and Bilge, I will examine in detail some of the underlying themes of the literature, as well as its precursors and applications. After bringing out certain themes and blind spots, I will propose an expanded notion of religious agency that can allow for an exploration of differential aspects of agency as well as more universal ones. I will argue that the depiction of Muslim women's agency in this literature, while successfully opposing liberal conceptions of agency as always oppositional, inadvertently replicates the secular bias by not leaving theoretical space for more complex and universal forms of religious agency as well. I will situate the literature within debates about (Western) feminism as a philosophical and political project. Throughout the chapter, I will ruminate about the limitations of academic discourse to adequately represent religious women in their complexity.

Feminism and the Post-Secular Turn

Before turning to a discussion of religious women's agency, it is imperative to sketch out the landscape of feminism from which this literature emerges, since it is this background which structures it and to which it is responding. A longitudinal perspective can also help identify the impact of secularism on the trajectory of feminist thought. We may be familiar with the metaphor of the four "waves" of feminism – the first wave corresponding to the struggle for suffrage in the late nineteenth century, the second to a push for equal pay and reproductive

rights starting in the 1960's, the third wave in the mid-1990s challenging structures of heteronormativity through a focus on the effects of intersecting axes of oppressions and the current fourth wave committed to a further deconstruction of gender norms and incorporating viral campaigns and awareness about power structures behind gender oppression. While the wave metaphor highlights the different foci of different feminist struggles over time, this metaphor implies a unified and coherent struggle, and occludes the differences and inequalities amongst different women. Linda Nicholson argues that the waves metaphor has outlived its usefulness and needs to be supplemented by the historical specificity of women's struggles and activism – the complexity of women's engagement with and demands for reform is distorted by a focus on larger waves and their goals and accomplishments. The more quotidian process of institutional and cultural reform has been steadily ongoing despite the metaphor of ebbs and flows of progress, although a lot remains to be done to ensure women have the social, economic and political freedom they require. Nicholson suggests that the metaphor of a kaleidoscope may better represent feminist movement over time, where some aspects become more pronounced at times but new patterns and colours emerge frequently.¹

Another problematic characteristic of dominant understandings of feminism is their heavily Eurocentric nature.² Since literature on feminism is overwhelmingly produced by the West and represents the West, any global or transnational feminist movement is not well included, if it all. As Chandra Mohanty poignantly points out, "I argue that assumptions of

1. Linda Nicholson, "Feminism in 'Waves': useful Metaphor or Not?" *New Politics* 48, vol. 12, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 1.

2. It is important to note that most of the feminist literature discussed originates in the English-speaking West. Feminist politics in other parts of Europe does not necessarily fall under these categories.

privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the “third world” in the context of a world system dominated by the West on the other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world.”³ She shows that the construct of a universal “woman” in Western literature replicates violent structures of colonization and homogenizes Third World women. If understandings of feminism in the West can reify imperial gestures, then this is already a serious failing of feminism as a universal theoretical project. Another internal weakness is feminism’s difficulty in capturing the implications of differences in identity, such as race. As Kimberle Crenshaw famously points out, it is impossible to differentiate between the root cause of oppression between race and gender as the two co-constitute each other and must be understood as miscible, and not additive. As in her metaphor of the intersection in which a black woman is injured, it is difficult to ascertain which car from which flow of traffic caused her injuries.⁴ Intersectionality has garnered much attention within feminist studies for its potential to include different axes of oppression, but it is also mired in conceptual issues and disagreements about how to best utilize it.⁵ As Vivian May cogently articulates, “We must consider whether (and how) intersectionality critiques may invite us to take up assumptions or

3. Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Spring-Autumn, 1984): 335.

4. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, issue 1, article 8 (1989): 149.

5. David McNally, “Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory” in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Ashley Bohrer, “Intersectionality and Marxism: A Critical Historiography,” *Historical Materialism* vol. 26, no. 2 (July 2018); Sirma Bilge, “Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies,” *Du Bois Review* vol. 10, no. 2 (2013); Tuck Arvin and Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations* vol. 25, no. 1 (2013).

reinforce premises that are profoundly anti-intersectional.”⁶ Feminism is still striving to incorporate difference both within, as in the case of intersectionality, and without, as in the case of Third World women.

Another site of exclusion in feminism articulated by Sara Salem is regarding secularism. She traces Western feminism back to the European Enlightenment and its focus on rationalism and humanism. Although not all feminists have been secular, the official discourse of feminism in Western academia and culture has been overwhelmingly secular. She states,

The metanarrative of secularising constitutes the assumptions underlying much of mainstream Western feminism, and explains the difficulties the field has had engaging women who are religious, as well as addressing the agency of religious women in nonsimplistic terms. While critiques have moved the feminism discipline forward, it remains largely Western and secular.⁷

Salem is concerned that discourses around agency and autonomy in feminist literature about religious women are largely skewed against religion as being patriarchal. Although intersectional feminism grapples with different axes of oppression that women face, even it has difficulty reconciling religion with feminism. Jakeet Singh agrees that “Although intersectionality has become increasingly mainstream among feminists, the challenges posed by religious women’s agency to feminism are still being grappled with, including those that test the limits of intersectionality itself.”⁸ It is only recently that literature on religious women has started to uncover some of the liberal accoutrements of feminism, including its insistence on

6. Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (Routledge, 2015), 100.

7. Sara Salem, “Feminist critique and Islamic feminism: the question of intersectionality,” *The Postcolonialist* vol. 1, no. 1 (2013): 13.

8. Jakeet Singh, “Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality,” *Hypatia* vol. 30, no. 4 (2015): 670.

specific forms of agency as a prerequisite for autonomy and freedom. This point will be illustrated in more detail later in the chapter when specific accounts of religious agency are analyzed. Here, it is relevant to point out that along with Western feminism's weaknesses in acknowledging Other women, it can also be complicit in the "metanarrative" of secularism which adds another layer of complexity when attempting to understand religious portrayals of women.

A brief examination of different works on Muslim women and agency sheds light on the changing nature of broad intellectual debates according to different political and academic currents.⁹ In the 1960's and 70's, feminist anthropologists struggled against the inherent male bias in anthropological research. During this time, the seeds of discussion of Muslim women's agency emerged in the context of resistance and empowerment against men and interpretation of religion by men. In the late 1980's and early 1990s, a different intellectual climate was prevalent, influenced by major thinkers such as Said and Asad. During this period there was an emergence of literature on gendered Muslim women's agency, such as Fatima Mernissi's work on patriarchal interpretations of Islam and women's resistance,¹⁰ and Abu-Lughod's study of honour in Bedouin society.¹¹ This literature attempted to capture what a specifically Islamic agency for women could look like but did not question the assumptions beneath understandings of agency and resistance. In the mid-2000s, there was an explicit examination

9. Sertac Sehliloglu, "Revisited: Muslim Women's agency and feminist anthropology of the Middle East," *Contemporary Islam* vol. 12 (2018).

10. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil : Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

11. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honour and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1986).

and critique of notions of agency in feminist theory. Mahmood's foundational work, *Politics of Piety*,¹² made room for an interpretation of Muslim women's agency grounded in ethical self-formation. This was possible through a critique of liberal assumptions of agency as grounded in resistance. Mahmood was particularly influenced by the postcolonial understanding of secularism in Asad's work¹³ as well as Butler's work on performativity and embodied subjectivity.¹⁴ A reaction then emerged against the "piety turn" in religious women's agency, to emphasize the other subjectivities of these women that are neglected by a sole emphasis on religious agency. It is important to point out here that this engagement predominantly features Western academics who are writing in English for a Western audience; from the outset, this literature is limited in scope and does not include non-Western or non-English discourses. Moreover, there are many other critical thinkers engaged in topics of Muslim feminism.¹⁵

After 9/11, there was increased scrutiny of Muslim women in the interest of justifying imperialist projects to fight terrorism.¹⁶ As mentioned earlier in the critique of the wave metaphor for Western feminism, any attempt to conglomerate vast literatures risks neglecting important continuities as well as differences within these overall trends. Yet it is useful to generalize momentarily to reflect on how different intellectual and political moments have impacted academic research on Muslim women's agency. Political events such as the

12. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

13. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

14. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

15. See, for example, Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Margot Badran, "Engaging Islamic Feminism," in *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*, ed. Anitta Kynsilehto (2008); Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

16. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 7.

independence movements after World War 2 and the terrorist attacks of September 11 have taken this literature in different directions. Furthermore, intellectual and philosophical currents such as postcolonialism and poststructuralism have also left an indelible mark on these academic discourses. These developments highlight the fact that literature is not created in a vacuum – exclusivist understandings of religious women’s agency can be provincialized by contextualizing them within dominant socio-political and intellectual climates. In this chapter, I will limit the analysis to what Sertac Sehliloglu categorizes as the literature about the pious nature of religious women’s subjectivity, while alternative frameworks in ensuing chapters will react to and critique a sole focus on piety. Importantly, the flourishing academic discourse on pious agency seeks to overturn liberal assumptions of agency foregrounded in Enlightenment perspectives of (white, male) autonomy. This view of is largely based on poststructuralist interpretations of agency as embodied and performative – this will be explained later in discussion with various authors such as Abu-Lughod, Mahmood and Bilge.

Rosi Braidotti deftly characterizes what she calls the “post-secular turn in feminism” within a historical return of religion to various spheres of political and intellectual life. Noting the return of religious extremism to all monotheistic faiths (although she neglects a similar phenomenon in non-monotheistic faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism), the influence of “clash of civilizations” arguments such as that of Huntington and the Islamophobia they imply, and the acknowledgement of ethical/spiritual spheres of life by academics and psychoanalysts, Braidotti sketches a horizon of secularism that is increasingly being encroached on by the “post-secular turn.” She describes the intersection of religion with feminism as an uneasy alliance which challenges mainstream assumptions about subjectivity and politics. Yet she is hopeful

that this re-positioning of subjectivity through the post-secular turn in feminism will open up new possibilities: “Transformative postsecular ethics takes on the future affirmatively, as the shared collective imagining that endures in processes of becoming, to effect multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others.”¹⁷ According to Braidotti, the work on religious agency has the potential to transform theoretical and political landscapes, incorporating a plurality of views. Her exposition on the post-secular turn in feminism is important in its contextual richness, as well as her analysis of the potential of the said literature for positive socio-political projects.

After having sketched the broad contours of Western (liberal) feminism, academic debates on religious women’s agency and the post-secular turn, I now analyze key texts about religious women’s agency that are represented in the postcolonial literature on religious agency. I will argue that the depiction of Muslim women’s agency in this literature, while successfully pushing back against secular liberal conceptions of agency by asserting the validity of “pious” agency, inadvertently replicates the bias of secularism by not engaging with multiple religious subjectivities that can contain universal concerns such as feminism and rationality. Even though previous engagements with Muslim women’s agency, such as those in the “third wave” described above, did posit religious agency as containing feminist and universal impulses, the literature under review creates a separate normative category for religious agency as being a unique subjectivity apart from universal concerns. Here, it may be useful to distinguish between the term “agency” and “resistance”; agency need not always be resistant,

17. Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Post-Secular Turn in Feminism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* vol. 25, no. 6 (2008): 18.

but I will argue that to preclude it from being resistant is also erroneous. Resistance, as well, need not always be against oppressive power; these terms will be analyzed in more detail in the discussion below. I rely on authors such as Pinar Dokumaci,¹⁸ Sehlirkoglu,¹⁹ Sindre Bangstad,²⁰ Samuli Schielke²¹ and Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osella²² who point out that in legitimizing pious religious agency, the literature homogenizes and limits the possibilities for multiple understandings and enactments of religiosity among Muslim women. Through the lens of the secular binary outlined in the previous chapter, I examine the gaps in this literature, and push for a more nuanced conception of religious feminist agency that can allow for negotiated self-understandings in a globalized and complex world.

Do Muslim Women Need Saving?

Abu-Lughod has made an important contribution to notions of Muslim women's subjectivities and the need for context-specific understandings of their goals and capabilities. An eminent anthropologist and ethnographer, Abu-Lughod has written extensively on gender and politics in the Muslim world. I will focus on her 2013 book entitled *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, which is based on an article she wrote with the same title in 2002. Chronologically, her work borders much of the work on religious women's agency. Her arguments provide rich

18. Pinar Dokumaci, "Toward a Relational Approach? Common Models of Pious Women's Agency and Pious Feminist Autonomy in Turkey," *Hypatia* (2020).

19. Sertac Sehlirkoglu, "Revisited: Muslim Women's agency and feminist anthropology of the Middle East," *Contemporary Islam* 12 (2018).

20. Sindre Bangstad, "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue," *Theory, Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2011).

21. Samuli Schielke, "Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life," *Zentrum Moderner Orient* no. 2 (November 2010).

22. Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osella, "Islam, Politics, Anthropology," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009).

theoretical substance and insights into racist Western narratives about Muslim women's oppression and the need to save them from their barbaric husbands, fathers and cultures. She argues that instead of allocating blame for global strife to religion, it is more accurate to look at socio-economic and political factors such as poverty, corruption and skewed international power relations. As such, her book makes a significant intervention into Western understandings of Muslim women, arguing that they must be understood on their own terms and that ideological constructions of Muslims not only misrepresent them, but can serve as rationale for discrimination and imperial ventures.

Abu-Lughod cautions against generalizations about any group of women, whether Muslim or not. She acknowledges that her own research studies Muslim women from a particular region, but this is by no means an adequate representation of the diversity of other Muslim women living in different parts of the world, with their own rich historical and cultural backgrounds. This highlights for her the need to recognize both the pervasiveness of women's oppression, both in the West and elsewhere; it also points to the specificity of their suffering as arising from unique circumstances that are not always cultural or gendered.²³ A focus on specific communities and personal narratives can serve as an antidote to academic excesses of generalization. Abu-Lughod utilizes her decades of interaction with and intimate knowledge of Muslim women's experiences in Egypt to interrogate some of the assumptions that abound in media and academia. For example, she narrates an incident of when she informed a long-time friend, Zaynab, that she was writing a book to explain to a Western academic audience that

23. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 16.

Muslim women are not oppressed by their religion. Zaynab, who lives a difficult life running a cafe and struggles to make ends meet for her children, is perplexed and confused as to how Islam can be blamed for her day-to-day challenges living in a volatile political and economic climate.²⁴ Abu-Lughod insists that “intimate familiarity with individuals anywhere makes it hard to be satisfied with sweeping generalizations about cultures, religions, or regions, or to accept the idea that problems have simple causes or solutions. I am more drawn to the detail and empathy of the novelist than to the bold strokes of the polemicist.”²⁵ As an anthropologist, Abu-Lughod is sensitive to differences and uses them to oppose academic and legal discourses which tend to use be more abstract.

Legal and political discourses about Muslim women’s rights can generalize and misrepresent their needs and goals. Abu-Lughod observes how rights discourses have flourished after 9/11, legitimizing Western imperial missions such as the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. For example, in his article entitled “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” Kim Berry analyzes the Bush administration’s claims that the war against the Taliban was also “a fight for the rights and dignity of women.” He argues for a more critical understanding of Afghan women’s plight to ensure they are not used as pawns in political conflicts.²⁶ Abu-Lughod agrees that an exclusive focus on rights can obscure the social and material lives of women, and this can be harmful for them. Referring to rights discourses that flourish in media, international organizations, academic debates and activist circles, she states:

24. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 1.

25. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 17.

26. Kim Berry, “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 137.

“I try to uncover what this framework that describes distant women’s lives only in terms of rights, present or absent, hides from us about both every day violence and forms of love. I ask what evaluating lives in terms of rights does for (and against) different kinds of women.”²⁷

Gayatri Spivak uses the term “saving Brown women from Brown men” to elaborate on a long-standing colonial trope in which the West is portrayed as civilized and legitimized to embark on civilizing missions to the non-West.²⁸ Sherene Razack describes this trope as a tool of colonial governance used by progressive people from all walks of life, including feminists, to justify regulative practices in the women’s lives.²⁹ Interventions based on colonial categorizations purporting to liberate women and give them their rights must be examined for ulterior motives, especially as they may not be sensitive to the particularities of these women.

Abu-Lughod notes that the veil has become a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women, an association that has its origins in colonial discourse. Whether in France, Canada or India, the symbol of the headscarf is taken to represent the inferiority of women in Islam and to call forth restrictive measures. Leila Ahmed’s book *Women and Gender in Islam* highlights an important historical moment in the development of the discourse surrounding the Islamic veil, which sheds light on its contemporary limitations. Through an examination of the relationship between gender and Islam in 20th century Egypt, Ahmed uncovers the role that colonialism has played in cementing together ideas of the veil as inherently tied to culture and progress. She dissects this discourse, originating in ideas of Orientalism, colonial inferiority of the non-West,

27. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 25.

28. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Routledge, 1994). 92.

29. Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 17.

and a hypocritical feminism rooted in English Victorian norms.³⁰ Framed through the paradigm of Western colonialism, the veil was designated the most obvious symbol of Islamic backwardness and inferiority. An examination of the historical situatedness of this discourse can illuminate the ways in which the Islamic veil has become an overdetermined signifier – in particular, the use of what Ahmed calls colonial feminism³¹ has made it difficult for the veil to become a positive means of asserting an Islamic identity. It is evident that much of the discourse around Muslim women has originated from colonial logic and contains discriminatory impulses. Abu-Lughod’s insistence on contextualizing the women in their individual lifeworlds is an important corrective to the generalizing impulse in much of this discourse and the imperialist incursions it can entail.

After cautioning readers about the detrimental effects of popular and political discourses about Muslim women, Abu-Lughod explains how it is often the socio-political conditions which impact their well-being in negative ways.³² After detailing the individual circumstances of an “aunt” and Zaynab, both of whom have tolerated unfavourable living conditions as wives and mothers, Abu-Lughod points out that the source of their suffering is not an intangible and oppressive religion or culture, but that “the most basic conditions of these women’s lives are set by political forces that are local in effect but national and even international in origin.”³³ She acknowledges that some of their struggles are gendered, but she sees these as secondary and not an inevitable result of their faith, as they are often portrayed.

30. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 150.

31. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 152.

32. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 16.

33. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 24.

Abu-Lughod emphasizes that her purpose in contextualizing these lives is two-fold – to show the failure of Western depictions of oppressed Muslim women, and to point out our own complicity and responsibility in the West. But this responsibility can only follow from the desire to listen carefully and look for commonalities:

If we were to listen and look, we might be forced to take account of contexts that are not as disconnected from our worlds and our own lives as we think. These contexts are shaped by global politics, international capital, and modern state institutions, with their changing impacts on family and community. Above all, these examples of women's situations might shake our moral certainty about some cherished values of liberalism that have diffused so widely in this era when human rights ideals have become hegemonic.³⁴

Abu-Lughod's sensitive and nuanced analysis of rural women in Egypt pushes us to look past media constructions and our own apathy to acknowledge a shared humanity with these women. She also urges us to acknowledge power dynamics that can create global inequalities and misrepresent the lives of Other women.

The project of representation of Muslim women and their suffering is mired in contradictions due to its politicization both in society and in academic debates. Abu-Lughod points us to the deleterious effects of these discourses on the lives of the women they purport to represent. The world of intellectuals and politicians can become far removed from the quotidian lives and needs of women in distant lands without a commitment to understanding them on their own terms. Abu-Lughod seeks to uncover how these representations work "politically and practically"³⁵ to legitimize structures of power. She gestures to the inadequacy of normative notions of freedom and agency to describe complex questions of women's flourishing in different contexts. She also situates these concepts within liberal and secular

34. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 202-3.

35. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 25.

frameworks, which contain residues of Enlightenment thought. Abu-Lughod points out how ideals of autonomy underlying these concepts fail to understand the socially-constrained nature of our lives, whether we are born in the West or elsewhere.³⁶ By weaving in narratives about resilient Muslim she has met in Egypt, she contrasts the contradiction between abstract notions of agency and freedom and their localized struggles. Abu-Lughod reiterates, “The lives of women like Zaynab and my aunt reveal terms like oppression, choice, and freedom to be blunt instruments for capturing the dynamics and quality of their lives. Such terms do little to help us understand the tireless efforts of these women, their songs of loss and longing, and their outbursts about rights.”³⁷ As an anthropologist, Abu-Lughod contextualizes the lives of the women she knows to bring out their unique circumstances. She also signals to the “moral certainty” of “cherished values of liberalism” that can give rise to hegemonic values of human rights and agency. For my discussion, Abu-Lughod’s sensitive analysis and eloquent reminders of responsibility provide an intellectual basis upon which later texts on Muslim women’s agency could emerge. Hers is a foundational work in the said literature since she critiques imperialist narratives about Muslim women and sketches the harms they can cause. She also brings out the tensions inherent in notions of agency as they are defined through paradigms of liberalism and problematizes their reliance on opposition and resistance. Mahmood is another foundational author who writes about religious women’s agency, building on some of these ideas, and it is to her work that I turn next.

Politics of Piety

36. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 18.

37. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 25.

Mahmood makes an important intervention into the literature on Muslim women's agency by making the case for a kind of agency that is uncoupled from liberal emancipatory perspectives of agency. She thus agrees with Abu-Lughod's in critiquing dominant Western philosophical and political frameworks, and in focusing on the unique subjectivities that religious women can have. Through her ethnographic study of the Muslim women's piety movement in Egypt, she challenges our perception of feminist agency as necessarily oppositional and seeking to overturn patriarchal norms. Mahmood also seeks to re-conceptualize notions of agency from a poststructuralist perspective to understand subjects who embody particular practices and capacities but are also shaped through subjection.³⁸ She asks, "Does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power – a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?"³⁹ Using historical exegeses of foundational liberal theorists, she shows that the ideas of negative and positive freedoms in liberal thought contribute to a procedural understanding of freedom that is more aligned with free autonomous choice than any normative or substantive aspect of the choice.⁴⁰ She implicates feminism in this project of prioritizing autonomy and choice over a more content-based framework for the progress of women.⁴¹ Mahmood seeks to understand how subordination can produce embodied forms of agency through discourses and power. Drawing on Foucault's concept of subjectivization and Butler's

38. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 7.

39. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 9.

40. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 11.

41. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 12.

idea of performativity, she says, “There is no possibility of ‘undoing’ social norms that is independent of the ‘doing’ of norms; agency resides, therefore, within this productive reiterability.”⁴² Mahmood then situates the piety mosque movement coordinated by women in Egypt, within this understanding of agency that is predicated on this embodied form of subjectivization.

Mahmood critiques feminist understandings of freedom and agency that are determined by liberal values that prioritize the autonomous and independent self. As she points out, these perspectives fail to consider the social and embodied capacities of women. For the Muslim women Mahmood describes, these dominant views can serve to blind us to other ways of understanding agency precluded by an exclusive focus on resistance. She explains, “Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective).”⁴³ This view is deeply entrenched in Enlightenment ideals in which struggling against authority was seen as a sign of rationality and freedom. Kant, perhaps the most influential Western moral theorist, emphasizes the necessity of using one’s own reason against all forms of authority who might seek to impede it. In his famous essay entitled “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” he expands on this idea of rationality and resistance with notions of freedom, and ultimately his view of universal politics and morality. Kant formulates: “All that is required for this enlightenment is freedom; and particularly the least harmful of all that may be called freedom, namely, the freedom for man to

42. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 20.

43. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 8.

make public use of his reason in all matters.”⁴⁴ According to Mahmood, this impetus towards resistance as a form of self-actualization and freedom is dominant within feminist theory today:

The articulation of conditions of relative freedom that enable women both to formulate and to enact self-determined goals and interests remains the object of feminist politics and theorizing. Freedom is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism, and critical scrutiny is applied to those who want to limit women’s freedom rather than those who want to extend it.⁴⁵

For her, this is problematic in the normative assumptions about freedom it entails – women who do not fit these criteria of freedom are left out of feminist theorizations. This is the void that Mahmood seeks to redress with her configuration of a different “topography of the self”⁴⁶ that can include non-oppositional, pious forms of agency. She asks the provocative question:

If we recognize that the desire for freedom from, or subversion of, norms is not an innate desire that motivates all beings at all times, but is also profoundly mediated by cultural and historical conditions, then the question arises: how do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledges, and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?⁴⁷

Her book speaks back to liberal assumptions about agency and expands ideas of agency to include pious agency, which she theorizes using Aristotle, Foucault, and Butler, among other thinkers.

While Kant emphasizes the importance of a sovereign reason that is not tainted by experience or sensory impressions,⁴⁸ Mahmood favours Aristotle’s emphasis on the development of character and virtue. This view allows for an elaboration on “the morphology

44. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 55.

45. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10.

46. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 24.

47. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

48. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (United States: Willey Book Co., 1899).

of moral actions, that is, to their precise shape and form.”⁴⁹ Using the work of Jeffery Minson,⁵⁰ Mahmood utilizes key aspects of the Aristotlean tradition in order to explicate the importance of ethical self-formation in the lives of the women she observes in the mosque movement. Other scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu also emphasize the importance of everyday practices as an indicator of the “habitus” of a particular group.⁵¹ Building on this view, Mahmood uses Foucault’s theorizations about subjectivization extensively to further build the theoretical foundation for forms of agency that can be formed in and through subjection to power. In outlining the nature of power, Foucault rejects the notion of power as necessarily repressive and expands on the “productive aspect of power”⁵² that holds potential to transform the subject. Regarding this positive perspective of power, he says,

This form of power... applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects.... [it is] a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.⁵³

Foucault recognizes power, whether imposed externally by another or through one’s own conscience, as holding a transformative capability to form subjects. Moreover, he asserts that power “induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.”⁵⁴ Contrary to some views that power weighs heavy on the subject and obliterates it, Foucault’s subject maintains its agency

49. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 25.

50. Jeffery Minson, *Questions of conduct: Sexual harassment, citizenship, government* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

51. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

52. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 119.

53. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994), 331.

54. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 119.

throughout the entanglement with power and is presented with a host of different choices and possibilities for re-invention in the process.⁵⁵ Based on this positive aspect of power, different “techniques of the self”⁵⁶ are possible through a form of self-discipline and the cultivation of certain practices. These techniques, or technologies, of the self are established through “modes of subjectivization” in which the individual acknowledges a form of rule and recognizes obligations to conform to that rule, whether it is of custom, tradition, or personal motivation.⁵⁷ For Foucault, this practice of moulding oneself in the face of power constitutes the cornerstone of morality: “There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivization’ and an ‘ascetics’ or ‘practices of the self’ that support them.”⁵⁸ Foucault builds on Aristotelian ideas of developing virtue within one’s character to explore relations of subjugation in which agency can be maintained through the formation of ethical practices that are bound by certain moral codes. Although Foucault mentions these rules of morality in the context of Christianity, I will show how Mahmood utilizes these notions to theorize about pious notions of agency amongst the Muslim women she studies in Egypt.

Another key theorist upon whom Mahmood relies for her view of religious agency is Butler. Butler’s contribution to feminist theory is vast and her understanding of the sex/gender

55. Foucault, *Power*, 340.

56. Michel Foucault, “On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Vol. 1 of Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. P. Rabinow, trans. R. Hurley et. al. (New York: New Press, 1997), 253.

57. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage House, 1990), 27.

58. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 28.

debate within feminism has been very influential. Her main intervention is that sex, and accompanying ideas of gender, are not biological but socially constructed. She states that sex “is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.”⁵⁹ Just as there is no individual who exists before and apart from power for Foucault, there is no sex that exists before the norms that reiterate and maintain heteronormative sexuality for Butler. She is deeply influenced by Foucault’s analysis of power and adapts it to her own argument of the power behind sexual norms that govern our understandings and expressions of gender. While Foucault located power in institutions and techniques of the self, Butler situates it within discourses that impose a system of signification upon individuals. She emphasizes the performative aspect of language through which the repetition and reiteration of norms has a constraining effect upon ideas of gender. Yet just as power dynamics do not foreclose agency for Foucault, Butler is also optimistic about the possibilities inherent in trying to subvert gender codes in discourse. She says, “There is no subject prior to its constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the ‘we’ cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds – and fails to proceed.”⁶⁰ For Butler, there is room for agency and choice even within the hegemony of heterosexual discourses and norms. Mahmood takes

59. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xii.

60. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84.

her cues from Butler for her explication of a pious form of agency that can thrive even within structures of apparent patriarchy and repression.⁶¹ By using the theoretical resources provided by Aristotle, Foucault and Butler, Mahmood conceptualizes a religious agency that resists liberal assumptions of resistance in order to flourish through self-discipline, ethical self-formation and performative acts.

Mahmood pushes for a new notion of religious agency which is understood primarily as resistance to the “regularizing impetus of structures of normativity.”⁶² In doing so, she wants to nuance analyses of subject-formation and explicate the way that norms can shape subjectivity in intimate ways that are not acknowledged by the liberal assumption of an oppositional form of agency. She brings to the fore the way that ethical life can impact and structure political life, producing different subjectivities in the process. To pursue this goal of enlarging agency to include pious forms, it is imperative to “explode the category of norms into its constituent elements – to examine the immanent form that norms take, and to inquire into the attachments their particular morphology generates within the topography of the self.”⁶³ In analyzing the women of the mosque movement, Mahmood directs our attention to the specific nature of practices that these women engage in and how they serve to transform their ethical subjectivities and, by extension, their politics. For example, while some may view these women as docile and complicit in their own oppression, a focus on their ethical formation can reveal a kind of agency that is gained through the ability to discipline themselves and achieve moral

61. Although there is much debate in feminist literature about the definition of patriarchy and its role in feminist struggle, in this dissertation I use it broadly to refer to the social and symbolic structure by which men dominate over women.

62. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 23.

63. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 24.

goals.⁶⁴ Through her ethnographic observations, she observes that outward markers of religiosity, whether through clothes, rituals or comportment serve as the basis for attaining spiritual heights, and these are encouraged and monitored through individual and collective appraisal. She explains:

Women learn to analyze the movements of the body and soul in order to establish coordination between inner states (intentions, movements of desire and thought, etc.) and outer conduct (gestures, actions, speech, etc.). Indeed, this distinction between inner and outer aspects of the self provides a central axis around which the panoply of ascetic practices is organized.⁶⁵

Through these practices, the women of the mosque movement are able to mould themselves according to religious requirements and engage in ethical self-transformations. According to Mahmood, these embodied practices impact subjectivities and constitute a pious form of agency that can contribute to political life as well. As she posits,

The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts.⁶⁶

Mahmood builds on the theoretical works of Foucault and Butler, among other thinkers, to show how these women maintain their agency in and through the very traditions that are often portrayed as oppressing them. She points out that any understanding of agency must take seriously the ethical grammars and moral systems in which the individuals reside.⁶⁷ With this analysis, she calls into question dominant liberal modes of agency which are primarily

64. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.

65. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 31.

66. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 32.

67. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 34.

understood as resistance to domination in favour of pious religious agency, which does not conform to Eurocentric ideas of oppositional autonomy. Bilge utilizes Mahmood's analysis and applies it to her analysis of the veil and its implications.

The Veil and Pious Agency

Bilge's article, "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women" contextualizes Mahmood's theoretical insights about the nature of religious agency alongside theoretical and socio-political machinations of the Muslim veil. The image of the Islamic veil draws mixed reactions from most people, who envision restrictive garments that silence women and seek to hide their sexuality. This popular image of the veil as enhancing patriarchy has become a common stereotype in media and cultural representations. Yet there is no one agreed upon notion of what represents the Islamic veil – there is a spectrum of "Islamic" attire followed by Muslim women around the world, ranging from modest clothes and a scarf around the neck to the full *niqab*, which covers the face and body. There is no comparable item of clothing that is used to symbolize the oppression of Western women. The fact that the symbolism of the veil is imposed from above through colonial feminism and not established by Muslim women themselves as a means of asserting their identity shows the problematic role the veil has come to play as an overdetermined symbol of either oppression or resistance. As Bilge points out the implicit assumption behind the veil: "Agency involves free-will; no woman freely chooses to wear the veil because it is oppressive to women; thus veiled women have no agency."⁶⁸ The veil, or hijab, becomes a

68. Sirma Bilge, "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2010): 18.

minefield of symbolic significance, and it closely related to common understandings of Muslim women's agency, or its lack thereof.

Bilge utilizes Mahmood's insights into the problematic nature of liberal assumptions of agency to show the instrumentalization of the veil as a symbol of either submission or resistance. We have already encountered the veil as having been coopted by colonial feminism to justify Oriental assumptions and imperialist incursions.⁶⁹ Bilge further complicates symbolic interpretations of the veil today and shows that they are also constrained by liberal understandings of agency. She describes the ways in which the veiled woman has become a cultural signifier in some discourses of feminism in the West and has become a symbol of either subordination or a particular kind of resistance. According to Bilge, both these discourses "[bind] apriori the meaning of her veiling to the teleology of emancipation, whether feminist or anti-imperialist."⁷⁰ The first discourse regarding Muslim women regards them as void of agency and suffering from false consciousness. Bilge explains how this stance associates the veil with forms of political Islam that promote patriarchy to subjugate women.⁷¹ The other discourse regards Muslim women who wear the veil as reacting to Western imperial projects by asserting their political identities. Bilge refers to this second discourse, articulated mainly by postcolonial authors, as a form of "instrumental reductionism" – the veil serves as a means to achieve symbolic resistance against Western imperialism and commodification.⁷² Bilge rightly criticizes both these discourses and posits a third reading that takes into consideration *religious agency*.

69. Ahmed, *Women and Gender*.

70. Bilge, "Beyond Subordination," 9.

71. Bilge, "Beyond Subordination," 15.

72. Bilge, "Beyond Subordination," 20.

Drawing on intersectionality and poststructuralist critiques of the humanist self, she questions the lack of consideration given to religious motivations. She agrees with Mahmood that religious agency must be understood outside of understandings of emancipation and resistance, to enable “conceiving agency within ‘irrational’ acts such as surrendering oneself to the divine/supernatural.”⁷³ For her, this has more than theoretical significance – it carries political import for issues of citizenship in which religious women, and in particular veiled Muslim women, become excluded from substantive citizenship, as in the case of France.⁷⁴

Examining the texts of Abu-Lughod, Mahmood and Bilge allow me to examine three different variations of academic research that elaborate on a unique notion of religious agency. There is a vast and rich literature discussing various aspects of pious religious agency, especially in relation to Muslim women.⁷⁵ Mahmood’s book *The Politics of Piety*, published in 2005, was

73. Bilge, “Beyond Subordination,” 23.

74. Bilge, “Beyond Subordination,” 15.

75. Sadaf Aziz, “Beyond Petition and Redress: Mixed Legality and Consent in Marriage in Pakistan,” *Bayan*, vol. 4, (2005); Moeen H. Cheema and Abdul-Rahman Mustafa, “From the Hudood Ordinances to the Protection of Women Act: Islamic Critiques of the Hudood Laws of Pakistan,” *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law* vol. 8, (2008-2009); Sherine Hamdy, “Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject by Saba Mahmood,” *American Ethnologist* vol. 35, no. 3 (2008); Moeen H. Cheema and Shahzad Akbar, “Liberal Fundamentalism?” *The News* (January 7, 2010), <https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/215205-liberal-fundamentalism?>; Faiza Mushtaq, “A Controversial Role Model for Pakistani Women,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*; Masooda Bano, “Madrasas as Partners in Education Provision: The South Asian Experience,” *Development in Practice* vol.20, no. 4-5 (2010); Masooda Bano, *The Rational Believer: Choices and Decisions in the Madrasas of Pakistan* (Cornell University Press, 2012); Humeira Iqtdar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jamaat-i-Islami and Jama’at-ud’Da’wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago University Press, 2011); Christine M. Jacobsen, “Trouble Threesome: Feminism, Anthropology and Muslim Women’s Piety,” *Feminist Review* vol. 98, no. 1 (2011); Asifa Quraishi, “What if Sharia Weren’t the Enemy: Rethinking International Women’s Rights Advocacy on Islamic Law,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* vol. 22, no. 1 (2011); F. Ibrahimhakkioğlu, “Embodied affective experience in Saba Mahmood’s ‘Politics of Piety’” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* (2012); Amina Jamal, *Jamaat-e-Islami Women in Pakistan: Vanguard of a New Modernity?* (Syracuse University Press, 2013); Sara Salem, “Feminist critique and Islamic feminism: the question of intersectionality,” *The Postcolonialist* vol. 1, no. 1 (2013); Nadia Fadil, “Islam and Feminism: A Vexed Relationship? Thinking Through the ‘Muslim Question’ and its Epistemological Conundrums,” *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* vol. 1, no. 1 (2014); Jakeet Singh, “Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality,” *Hypatia* vol. 30, no. 4 (2015); Niamh Reilly, “Recasting secular thinking for emancipatory feminist practice,” *Social Compass* vol. 64, no. 4 (2017).

ground-breaking in its initial explication of a new kind of agency that called into question our liberal attachments to values of autonomy premised on opposition to tradition. By deconstructing the humanist conception of agency as “a universal trait of a pre-social, autonomous moral agent,”⁷⁶ she builds the theoretical foundation for pious agency that other authors build on and incorporate into new avenues of research. In this project, putting Abu-Lughod, Mahmood and Bilge in conversation allows for fruitful analysis of this burgeoning literature, its precursors and its applications. It also allows for more in-depth analysis of some of the underlying themes.

Examining Religious Agency for Secular Bias:

As mentioned earlier, Abu-Lughod’s work borders much of the work on religious women’s agency; her work extends from the late 70s to her 2013 book entitled *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* and beyond. As such, she has been a pioneer in the epistemological terrain of Muslim women’s agency. Although her 2013 book came after Mahmood’s book in 2005, its theoretical contributions build a solid sociological and anthropological basis for Mahmood’s theoretical intervention. Abu-Lughod puts forward a strong argument for context-specific understanding of Muslim women and their capabilities and desires. Through sensitive ethnographic research, she highlights how the broad strokes of academic discourse can miss the details of these women’s lives. She opens up conceptual space to critique the Western vocabulary of freedom and oppression that does not do justice to the complexity of their lives, which are often more negatively impacted by Western geopolitical and economic interference

76. Bilge, “Beyond Subordination,” 13.

than by religious traditions. Her emphasis on subjectivity and the particularity of Muslim women's experiences allows me to critique forms of liberalism that impose Western values on non-Western women. Mahmood also follows an anthropological approach, although her concern is primarily using her ethnographic research to speak back to Western theoretical conceits about freedom and agency.

Although Abu-Lughod and Mahmood have similar insights and critiques about the nature of Western liberalism and feminism, their different methods yield different conceptions regarding the nature of the problem, and how to best resolve it. Abu-Lughod follows a deductive approach through which she aims to test dominant liberal theories of women's oppression using her observations of the lives of the women she knows, while Mahmood utilizes an inductive approach which seeks to use the experiences of the women in the mosque movement to interrogate liberal assumptions of agency. Thus Abu-Lughod opts for a bottom-up approach while Mahmood prefers a heavily top-down, theoretical method that will allow her to disprove normative liberal ideas. The difference in methods showcases some of the dangers of theorizing when it is not grounded primarily in lived experiences. It also cautions us about the dangers of sensitive and ethical engagement with Others, especially when they are being studied by "outsiders." Another constructive difference for my purposes is that while Abu-Lughod ultimately seeks to show similarities between all women through a focus on their contexts and the social constraints they face, Mahmood seeks to show the unique performative aspects of pious agency for religious women. This will be relevant for the discussion of poststructuralist feminism in the next chapter, and its emphasis on particularity and difference. Abu-Lughod's book does not reify a secular bias (secularism = rationality/humanism vs. religion

= irrationality/oppression) since she is reticent to make any theoretical interventions, instead settling for a context-specific approach to understanding all women's struggles.

After having explicated Mahmood's notion of agency that can include pious forms, I examine it critically in light of secularism's theoretical underpinnings and biases. Upon closer examination, Mahmood's own critique of what she calls "secular liberalism" rests on an overly abstract, tenuous definition of secularism. Moreover, while her theoretical contribution seeks to counter what she describes as "the logic of repression and resistance,"⁷⁷ it inadvertently serves to reify the binary of secularism in which religion = irrationality/oppression and secularism = rationality/humanism. Mahmood's overly conceptual approach utilizes the experiences of the women she studies to prove a theoretical point they themselves do not profess as they are more interested in living good religious lives and not pushing back against liberal conceptions.⁷⁸ She also accomplishes in practical terms the opposite of what she sets out to do in the theoretical realm (counter secular liberalism), by legitimizing the secular binary by which religious women are irrational/oppressed. As will be shown later, this binary can have very real consequences for Muslim women who do not see themselves represented by either caricatured stereotype.⁷⁹ By confirming that the women of the mosque movement are motivated by external dictates of piety instead of reason, and eschew the realm of politics (even though Mahmood takes pains to assert that their ethical lives do carry political import),

77. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

78. Bangstad, "Anthropological Feminism After Virtue," 33.

79. Jamal, "Piety, Transgression, and the Feminist Debate on Muslim Women: Resituating the Victim-Subject of Honor-Related Violence from a Transnational Lens" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, issue 1 (September 2015); Afiya S. Zia, *Faith and Feminism in Pakistan: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy?* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academy Press, 2018).

she confirms the binary that posits that these religious women do not possess humanist ideals, such as feminism, or rationality. Hence, she is ironically in line with the version of secularism prescribed by Western thinkers such as Kant and Habermas and described by Taylor and Connolly. Bangstad analyzes two major flaws with Mahmood's conceptualizations of secular liberalism that allow for the slippage described above between what her theory professes to do and what it accomplishes. Firstly, she creates a stark contrast between secular liberalism and religious traditions to make her ethnographic work speak back to what she perceives as the hegemony of Western notions of feminism as resistance. In doing so, she homogenizes both camps as absolute opposites – a theoretical move that belies the realities of both Western and Islamic traditions and lived experiences. As Bangstad states, "The ideology of secular liberalism in Mahmood's polemical construction of it appears to be as all-encompassing and determinative for its followers as it is assumed that religious faiths are for the believers."⁸⁰ Western secular liberalism is positioned against Islamic traditions. This is problematic for many reasons, from the misrepresentation of already marginalized women to providing theoretical justification for political manoeuvres against Muslims in an already antagonistic political climate post 9/11. The second conceptual mistake incurred by Mahmood in her explication of secular liberalism is her elision of the very real differences between "secularism" and "liberalism." At no point in her book does she give background into the vast historical and theoretical trajectories of these two concepts, and explain why they necessarily work together to oppose Islamic traditions. As Connolly explains, neither secularism nor liberalism is reducible to each

80. Bangstad, "Anthropological Feminism After Virtue," 35.

other,⁸¹ and secularism may thrive in illiberal contexts.⁸² Mahmood's inaccurate presentation of secular liberalism necessarily leads to biases in her conceptualization of pious agency that opposes said secular liberalism. Here, it is helpful to remember that Mahmood was trying to prove a particular theoretical point about agency as also being capable of supporting patriarchal structures. While pointing out conceptual critiques, we can keep in mind her own theoretical move which she carries out very convincingly so as to not fault her for work she never claimed to do.

As I noted earlier, secularism, as it emerged and evolved as a European enterprise, rests on the twin pillars of exclusive humanism and reason (as a criterion for individuals and in the public sphere). Upon closer investigation, Mahmood's religious agency, while empowering women through the valuation of their ethical work as sites of politics, is strangely void of any aspects of humanism or reason, as described above. I will analyze this kind of religious agency for its lack of feminism and rationality, and then endeavour to understand if it can be explained by the nature of modern secularism. For the purposes of this analysis, I will understand humanism in the context of Mahmood's study as feminism, since the women's agency is uniquely gendered within the movement, and both involve ideas of emancipation and empowerment based on one's needs and potential as emanating from within the self (as opposed to from an external source, as in the case of the piety movement). Rationality will be discussed as a form of inner deliberation in which an individual is able to decide on matters in her own self-interest and has the wherewithal and ability to carry out actions related to this

81. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.

82. Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism and Relativism," *boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (2004): 173.

deliberation, similar to the Kantian understanding. It will also be used as the defining factor in public sphere debates, as Habermas prescribes.⁸³ It can be useful to differentiate the meta-philosophical approach to secularism used in this essay, as a gradual emergence of ideas which come to dominate the social imaginary, from the ways that secularism is understood in quotidian life. Mahmood notes that while the women in the mosque movement are critical of the impact of secular ideas in their lives, secularism

provide[s] the structuring conditions for the articulation of the da'wa/piety movement. As such, despite its avowed antagonism toward secularism, the da'wa/piety movement presupposes many key secular concepts (about time, history, causality, and so on), making the movement far more hybrid in character than its practitioners would acknowledge.⁸⁴

She cautions us against representing the mosque movement as an ancient relic from a pre-secular past and points out their complicity in some assumptions of modernity.

Before addressing the supposed gap in her theorizations about religious agency, it is important to acknowledge that Mahmood is quite aware that her project does not address questions such as the political and feminist imbrications of the mosque movement – her project does not claim to do this. Responding to these kinds of critiques, she says,

I [am] not interested in delivering judgments on what counts as a feminist versus an antifeminist practice, to distinguish a subversive act from a nonsubversive one.... Rather, the aim of this book is to develop an analytic language for thinking about modalities of agency that exceed liberatory projects (feminist, leftist, or liberal).⁸⁵

As such, it is not fair to ascribe to her failure for a project she never claims to address. *Politics of Piety* claims to go beyond this to build understanding and acceptance for other kinds of agency

83. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

84. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xv.

85. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, x.

that go against the grain of liberal, emancipatory projects. My aim is to take her novel and radical view of *religious* agency and add to it to make it speak back to rigid conceptualizations of secularism that do not associate religion with reason or humanism. As such, I build on Mahmood's work to expand possibilities for religious agency. I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mahmood for paving the way for theorizations about religious agency that are not conditioned by Western political theory. Taking heed of Abu-Lughod's caution to cultural sensitivity and context, I endeavour to use the soft strokes and empathy of a novelist, but academic convention also dictates I use the broad strokes of a theorist at times to fill the gaps left by eminent theorists before me. I hope I will do justice to this task of balancing critique with a healthy respect and admiration of those upon whom I rely, and I build on.

A critical difference between Mahmood's pious agency and secular understandings of humanism and rationality is that the former sense of agency is produced externally while the latter has an internal source within (wo)man. As shown earlier, this individualization of aspects of beneficence and autonomy have shifted from transcendental origins to immanent ones through processes of secularization, spurred on by Enlightenment values. The religious agency Mahmood describes, however, is not rooted in self-understandings. She explains,

The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions; in this important sense, the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts.⁸⁶

86. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 32.

Religious agency as it is expounded here is enacted through the performative task of measuring up to and perfecting themselves according to models of women's piety in their communities and traditions. From the outset, an external source of agency seems to preclude ideas of self-fulfillment and rationality. Mahmood explains that rationality for these women is subservient to the needs of ethical self-formation:

Among mosque participants, individual efforts toward self-realization are aimed not so much at discovering one's 'true' desires and feelings, or at establishing a personal relationship with God, but at honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self.⁸⁷

Hence, reason here is different from Kantian rationality which appeals to an innate sense of self-awareness in opposition to excessive authoritative demands. Here, reason is used to understand requirements of pious norms and how to best approximate them through self-discipline and a negation of individual desire. Thus far, I show that religious agency is described as lacking any push for self-realization or feminist rights through reasoned reflection.

The use of reason in the public sphere is another defining feature of secularism. For the mosque movement, the public sphere is largely eschewed in favour of smaller women-only groups within the community. Mahmood explains that the mosque movement is grounded in ethical spaces instead of political ones. She asserts:

Despite the self-avowedly apolitical stance of the pietists, their practices have a profoundly transformative affect in the social and political fields. They have transformed the very ground on which nationalist, statist, and other kinds of secular-liberal projects can be envisioned and practiced. To ignore the transformative potential of the piety movement is to fail to understand its power and force in Egyptian society.⁸⁸

87. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 31.

88. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xi.

Mahmood seeks to critique stringent requirements for social groups to be explicitly political, instead grounding the mosque movement's political potential in "affective, ethical, and sensible capacities that are often ignored as consequential to the analysis of politics."⁸⁹ She describes the ethical realm's political import as encompassing sensibilities, lifestyles, gender norms⁹⁰ as well as more explicit social influence on ways of dress, speech, entertainment and household management, among other areas.⁹¹ As a result, the mosque movement's impact on politics is an unintended consequence of its work in the ethical and social realms.⁹² Mahmood does not see the mosque movement as embodying a pious agency that asserts itself in the political realm. This analysis can be understood in two ways – on one hand, Mahmood blurs the distinction between private religious and public secular spheres by insisting that religious actions carry political import. On the other hand, she accomplishes this by obliterating the very existence of a public sphere in which rational deliberations are carried out, as set forth by Habermas. While I agree that dichotomous public and private realms are problematic, I think it is important for the sake of political feminism to keep the existence of a public realm. By denying any special characteristics of a political sphere in which citizens can debate ideas and hold each other accountable through laws and institutions, she inadvertently reiterates that religious agency is not rational and political. By examining Mahmood's religious agency through the lens of secularism, I show that it reifies the secular binary by which religious women are irrational and oppressed.

89. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xiii.

90. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xix.

91. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 4.

92. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 34.

Bilge uses Mahmood's analysis of a unique religious subjectivity to analyze discourses surrounding the veil. As she points out, veiled Muslim women become instrumentalized along the lines of either the liberal trope of the oppressed woman or the postcolonial stereotype of the Muslim women opposing Western imperialism through the wearing of her veil. She believes that allowing women a unique kind of religious agency can allow us to understand the non-instrumental reasons many Muslim women choose to wear the veil – such as to please God. The veil is only one way that discourse about Muslim women is overdetermined by Western conceptual biases, such as liberal views of agency. Bilge's application of Mahmood's insights into political and moral assumptions about the veil are prudent and show that liberal conceptions abound in every day societal and political constructions. But, following Mahmood, she does not allow room for a fourth way of understanding the self in which religious piety is beyond subordination, resistance to imperialism, or pious agency a la Mahmood, and can also contain political and feminist motivations. Thus her analysis, as well, concedes to secular biases because she does not also show that religious agency can contain feminist and rational impulses. A fuller theoretical conceptualization of religious agency can allow for a fuller representation of Muslim women in the political sphere, which can have an impact on media portrayals and issues of citizenship and inclusion.

Although Mahmood does highlight the limits of religious discursive traditions in *Politics of Piety*, her analytic focus on pious and performative agency misses the other aspects of these women's agency, especially those that can show its multidimensional and relational characteristics. She states:

An Islamic discursive tradition, in this view, is therefore a mode of discursive engagement with sacred texts, one effect of which is the creation of sensibilities and embodied capacities (of reason, affect, and volition) that in turn are the conditions for the tradition's reproduction. Significantly, such a concept does not assume all-powerful voluntary subjects who manipulate the tradition for their own ends, but inquires into those conditions of discursive formulation that require and produce the kind of subjects who may speak in its name.⁹³

In defining the Islamic tradition as a discursive process of ethical self-formation to fit within prescribed norms, she gives short shrift to other facets of these women's religious agency. For example, Hajja Faiza is a "da'iya," or a preacher, who is self-educated and teaches religious classes at an upper-middle class mosque in Egypt. Mahmood describes her detailed knowledge of scholarly sources and jurisprudence that allow her to give a full range of options for any religious inquiry. Mahmood is careful to point out that Hajja Faiza's use of the vocabulary of free choice and rights to choose different interpretations does not accord with liberal humanist notions since it is directed at reconciling one's will to established scholarly opinions.⁹⁴ However, it is more difficult for Mahmood to reconcile some of Hajja Faiza's more controversial and "unpredictable"⁹⁵ scholarly opinions with generally accepted practices, such as her penchant for leading her own women's prayers even when a male is present, or her allowance for Muslim women to interact with commercial venues that sell alcohol. Mahmood acknowledges that Hajja Faiza's religious opinions "entail an exercise of reason, assessment, and judgment that complicates a simple reading of what it means to follow these supposedly clear injunctions."⁹⁶ Yet Mahmood is content to view her apparently progressive interpretations as indicative of the same immutable discursive field because she does not interrogate the underlying assumptions

⁹³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 115-6.

⁹⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 85.

⁹⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 90.

⁹⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 90.

about women's subservient roles in Islamic tradition.⁹⁷ I argue that if Mahmood's understanding of pious agency were open to other aspects of religious agency that are not dictated by religious authority, she might have described Hajja Faiza's unique preaching style as representative of her multidimensional religious agency, which can contain complex, even contradictory aspects, such as inner resolve, ambition or desire.

Furthermore, Mahmood's explication of pious agency as an individual accomplishment of ethical self-formation neglects the relational aspect of religious agency. She describes practices of preaching as a religious duty required of every Muslim, a fact that "further strengthened the general propensity toward the individualization of moral responsibility so characteristic of modern Islam."⁹⁸ The push towards a non-elitist and accessible religious education results in an informal, non-state religious sphere that caters to individuals with no formal training, and even women.⁹⁹ Moreover, Mahmood's analysis of pious agency along the lines of poststructuralist agency to *particular* modes of subjectivization¹⁰⁰ and the prioritization of the body, self, or subject¹⁰¹ relies on "individual efforts toward self-realization."¹⁰² This kind of agency stands in contrast to the social and communal impetus found within Islamic tradition and in the piety movement itself. Mahmood describes the word "da'wa" as most closely aligned with the Islamic principle of *amr bil ma'ruf wal-nahi 'an al-munkar*, or the act of enjoining others towards goodwill, and forbidding wrongdoing.¹⁰³ At its very core, the idea of preaching

⁹⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 109-110.

⁹⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 64.

⁹⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 24.

¹⁰² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 31.

¹⁰³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 58.

is connected with a social obligation to direct others to do good works while doing so oneself, and to abstain from evil. Moreover, there is a strong communal sensibility within the piety movement, with women gathering in mosques to pray together and engage in discussion and debate about the role of religion in their lives. As the formal places for religious education for women,¹⁰⁴ these gatherings allow their religious identities to be solidified and legitimized through discussion with their peers and teachers. This discrepancy pushes for an expanded notion of pious agency beyond individual self-formation to a relational and interdependent religious agency.

The Problem of Academic Discourse

While the problems of a secular academy were discussed in the previous chapter, I will here investigate the particular impact of this bias on religious women, and academic research on religious women. Through examinations of the aforementioned texts, this chapter has shown that there is an overarching secular bias that exists in the current postcolonial literature on religious women's agency. While the literature does an exemplary job at combatting liberal assumptions of agency as necessarily oppositional, it does this at the expense of homogenizing religious self-expressions to performative affirmations of the status quo. As such, while it impressively speaks back to imperialistic notions of feminist agency exported from Enlightenment ideals, it fares less well developing a positive conception of women's religious, and non-religious, agency. If we contextualize the secular bias (religion = irrational/oppressed) into the analysis of the emergence of secularism in the previous chapter, it becomes apparent

¹⁰⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 41.

that there are several meta-theoretical layers operating at the background of notions of religious agency. Although Mahmood proposes to combat *secular liberal* biases, this is inaccurate, as has been mentioned earlier, and her work can inadvertently serve to reify secular understandings of religion and its potentialities. I have already expounded on a critique of the external and internal power structures inherent in the academy in the previous chapter. As Brown showed, “the Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique, and... it is with this governance that we must begin.”¹⁰⁵ The academy is complicit in structuring critique, or the pursuit of unrestricted knowledge, as a solely secular achievement. In the US, there was a process of transformation within universities to secularize the curriculum in the late 19th century, in response to debates about the diminishing role of Protestantism in the academy.¹⁰⁶ There has not been as much analysis of the process of academic secularization in Canadian universities, but since US universities tend to dominate globally, Canadian universities can be assumed to follow similar trajectories. There is also a heavy influence of positivism from the US in the social sciences that is discernible in Canadian academic disciplines.¹⁰⁷ The legacy of Enlightenment thought ensures that Western political theorists from Kant onwards consolidated the canon of political thought in reaction to religious orthodoxy, thus associating religion with tradition and secularism with rationality. This association then becomes a part of the academic social imaginary and is difficult to isolate and remedy. Moreover, the academy

102. Wendy Brown, “Introduction,” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), 8.

103. Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

104. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (Armonk: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), xxiv.

can be complicit in creating barriers for those on the margins. The inequalities present in society can be replicated, and in some ways exacerbated, by the academy, whether institutionally through neoliberal requirements of productivity and restrictive tuition costs, or through disciplinary requirements which dictates which methodologies and epistemologies are deemed legitimate. Religious women sit at the nexus of many different identities that have traditionally been sidelined in academic discourse; even intersectional theorists are grappling with how to best include them in articulations of feminism.¹⁰⁸ It is helpful to recall Said's critique of knowledge production in the West as a colonial project that incentivized the creation of special departments and "area studies" as a part of Orientalist academic programs to study Muslims and Islam.¹⁰⁹ Islam thus became a separate topic of study instead of just another epistemology among many in Western academia, and I would argue that this has helped give rise to the current literature on Muslim agency as being distinct and separate from other kinds of agency. Due to these Orientalist tendencies within the academy, it becomes even more difficult for Muslim women academics to navigate the process of translating complex lived experiences under different religious and non-religious racializing patriarchies.

Feminist epistemologies have long struggled to make headway into the academy. Starting from philosophical canons skewed towards male versions of autonomy, to feminism's difficulties incorporating difference and its complicity in forms of academic gatekeeping, there are internal hierarchies that make it difficult for religious women to be heard. Feminist philosophers have worked to interrogate the privileged white male perspective in theory.¹¹⁰ For

105. Singh, "Religious Agency," 670.

106. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 67-106.

107. Nancy Harstock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical

example, Lorraine Code builds on previous feminist critiques to pave ground for a “Copernican” revolution based on gender. Building on and critiquing Kant’s placing of man at the centre of the knowable universe, Code presents “ecological thinking,” which privileges a feminist way of conceptualizing the world that is based on sensitivity to methodological, epistemic and contextual differences in knowledge production.¹¹¹ As was mentioned earlier, Western feminism has often functioned as an imperial master narrative that can subsume Muslim women’s experiences.¹¹² Moreover, internal hierarchies of feminism in the academy can serve to maintain the status quo and keep divergent perspectives at bay. Bilge defines this “disciplinary feminism” as “a hegemonic intellectual position with regards to knowledge production, a way of doing ‘science’ which is more concerned with fitting into the parameters of what constitute legitimate scientific knowledge than challenging those parameters.”¹¹³ This type of feminism, which she differentiates from a more radical form of “academic feminism” which challenges institutional practices, functions to preserve prestige and elitism rather than to incorporate social change and challenge structures of inequality. Natasha Behl argues that female academics are faced with “exclusionary inclusion” by which they are formally included,

materialism” in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983); Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” *The Centennial Review* vol. 36, no. 3 (1992); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives,” *Feminist Studies* vol. 14 (1988); Lynn Nelson, “A Feminist Naturalized Philosophy of Science.” *Synthese* vol. 104, no. 3 (1995); Linda Martin Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory*. (Cornell University Press, 1996); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Conscience and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2000); Mary Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry: From Political Conviction to Methodological Innovation* (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

108. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

109. Asma Barlas, “Engaging Islamic feminism: Provincializing feminism as a master narrative” in *Islamic feminism: current perspectives* (2008); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

110. Bilge, “Intersectionality Undone,” 409.

but according to internally accepted hierarchies, similar to Bilge's definition of disciplinary feminism.¹¹⁴ Racialized women can also be burdened with the additional labour of having to educate others while facing racism in the academy; Rita Dhamoon points out that this extra workload is often not recognized or reimbursed.¹¹⁵ Female academics are often stymied by disciplinary conventions regarding methodology – in line with the positivist background of social science mentioned earlier, quantitative approaches or top-down theories are preferred to qualitative ones which center the object of research. By implication, the very communities and individuals who may be able to “speak truth to power” are effectively silenced because their voices cannot be made to fit into academic categories.¹¹⁶ It is evident that there are institutional and epistemological constraints in place that impact religious individuals and women; this context is important to understand the added hierarchies for women, religious women and academics researching religion in the academy.

It is important to clarify why I categorize the secular bias in the literature on religious agency as a problem of academic discourse. As Bilge points out, disciplinary forms of feminism resist social change and insulate themselves within the walls of the ivory tower. I argue this can also be the case with overly abstract accounts of religious agency which prioritize theory over a complex and dynamic view of women's lives. As described by Sehlkoglou earlier, academic debates are structured in and through their political and intellectual climates. Schielke is critical about intellectual trends that can become hegemonic in the academy, eliciting funding and thus

111. Natasha Behl, “Diasporic researcher: an autoethnographic analysis of gender and race in political science,” *Politics, Groups and Identities* vol. 5, no. 4 (2017): 580.

112. Rita Kaur Dhamoon, “Racism as a Workload and Bargaining Issue,” *Socialist Studies* vol. 14, no. 2 (2020): 1.

113. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretive Methods*, 91.

becoming attractive options for graduate students.¹¹⁷ Specifically, he is wary of the “research programme” that portrays Islam as a discursive tradition in a way that is reductive and uncritical.¹¹⁸ He points out that this academic discourse only describes a small percentage of Muslims in the world who are committed to living ascetic lives of piety, but these experiences are taken to represent the entirety of the Muslim religious experience.¹¹⁹ Sehlirkoglu agrees with Schielke that the literature on religious women’s piety has taken on a dominant role in the academy to the extent that it is difficult to study other divergent aspects of Muslims’ lives.¹²⁰ Soares and Osella caution that academic discourse (along with Western media) can reiterate essentializations about Muslims. These reified representations contain “generative power” and can refashion conceptual categories (S2). This ability of discourse, or theory, to impact society and cultural understandings calls for responsible and ethical academic practices that, as much as possible, accurately portray the lived realities of the objects of study. Soares and Osello state: “It is imperative to pay attention to the genealogies of discourses... which might become authoritative and normative, and though which politics in Muslim societies is comprehended, experienced, legitimated, or contested.”¹²¹ Susan Griffin cautions against forms of academic theory that can become dogmatic: “When a theory is transformed into an ideology, it begins to destroy the self and self-knowledge. Originally born of feeling, it pretends to float above and around feeling. Above sensation. It organizes experience according to itself, without touching experience.”¹²² While the literature under review may not have reached the level of dogma yet,

114.Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 2.

115.Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 3-4.

116.Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 2.

117.Sehlirkoglu, “Revisited: Muslim Women’s agency,” 84-5.

118.Soares and Osello, “Islam, Politics, Anthropology,” S2.

119.Susan Griffin, “The Way of All Ideology,” *Signs* vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 648.

it is imperative to examine the way the concepts have been taken up both within the academy and within society, where they have the ability to negatively affect religious women themselves.

It is important to remember that Mahmood, in articulating her foundational theory of pious agency, herself states that she is “untethering the concept of agency from that of progressive politics for the purpose of analytical clarity.”¹²³ But as I hope my line of critique shows, it is not possible to segregate academic discourse from broader society and politics. Although we cannot fault the author for the ways that her work is taken up as part of popular and intellectual culture, we *can* seek to critically interrogate the concepts themselves and to remedy any gaps that become apparent in practice. Amina Jamal and Afiya Zia present examples of how the current literature on religious agency can ignore the multifaceted and complex dynamics of Muslim women’s lives and, through reifying the secular bias in society, can indirectly harm them. In “Piety, Transgression, and the Feminist Debate on Muslim Women: Resituating the Victim-Subject of Honor-Related Violence from a Transnational Lens,” Jamal describes the notions of piety that aligns Muslim women’s agency with religious virtue. Analyses of victims of honour-related violence also contain implicit references to religious ideas of piety, thus constituting it as the norm. Jamal notes how modern constructions of secularism can create an artificial binary between individualism/freedom and communitarianism/religion, thus inadvertently blaming victims of honour-based violence for their perceived transgressions against Islam. She sheds light on potential external sources of violence upon women due to

120. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 36.

imperialistic narratives which situate them as outside the fold of Islam. As an antidote against these essentialized representations of Muslim women, Jamal calls for “a faith-based embrace of the idea of women’s transgressive agency as a possibility of action within rather than against Islamic tradition.”¹²⁴ Here, there is an expanded notion of religious agency which can include transgression as having potential for action and change within religious norms. Zia agrees that simplistic understandings of religious agency can be detrimental to women’s rights. She explains:

The concern over the anthropological recovery of Muslim women’s non-liberal agency is that it encourages a kind of Muslim exceptionalism while diffusing the politics of faith-based empowerment, and is justified through a concentrated critique and rejection of universalism, secularism and Enlightenment-based rights.¹²⁵

In her view, essentialized notions of piety fail to take into account other layers of religious agency which *can* be oppositional. She is concerned that the current popularity of the concept of performative religious piety has created an intellectual atmosphere where different expressions of religion, such as socialist and feminist strands, are automatically aligned with liberal colonial legacies and are delegitimized. As Zia works with Muslim women in Pakistan in an activist role, she is wary of academic discourse that can take away from the struggles of Muslim women for their rights in patriarchal, authoritarian political environments. Through the research of Jamal and Zia, I show some of the possible negative implications of a one-dimensional view of religious agency in the lives of Muslim women. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the secular bias in the current literature on religious agency as a problem of

121. Jamal, “Piety, Transgression, and the Feminist Debate,” 57.

122. Zia, *Faith and Feminism in Pakistan*, 3.

academia since there is a large discrepancy between the academic representations and the lived experiences of most Muslim women.

To further showcase the discrepancies between academic descriptions and Muslim women's lives, there is rich and emerging research and theorization on the diverse and negotiated identities of Muslim women that seeks to build on and expand current notions of pious agency. This research engages with the complexities of living a moral life in a secular world, the need for creative religious agency when navigating multiple structures of oppression and the ways that religious women can live imperfect and ambivalent lives much like non-religious women. Soares and Osella highlight that the study of Muslims and Islam has long been the subject of Orientalizing and essentializations. They are concerned about the emphasis on the ethical in current literature in that it can reduce questions of politics to micropolitics. They also foreground the totalizing nature of the piety turn that has the potential to essentialize Muslim women and reify cultural differences. Instead of a singular focus on religious piety, they think it is more accurate to describe the realities of religious experience, which can involve ambivalence and failure as well. According to Soares and Osella, "People lead their everyday lives in complex cultural, religious, and political environments, evaluating and responding to different competing local and global media messages."¹²⁶ They refer to the term "islam mondain," meaning "Islam in the present world," as a better way of conceptualizing religious identity in a globalized context where Muslims are often coming to terms with their religious identities within secular contexts. Accordingly, they state:

123. Soares and Osello, "Islam, Politics, Anthropology," S11.

Although many Muslims today are engaged in various kinds of ethical self-fashioning and concerned with the correct practice of Islam, this is only one part of what is effectively a new kind of sociality. In many places, Muslims are making efforts to produce themselves as modern religious subjects within contexts of considerable political and economic uncertainty, as well as increased global interconnections.¹²⁷ (S11)

The new kind of sociality described by Soares and Osella can include the neoliberal economy and facets of modernity. “Islam mondain” can help avoid instrumentalizations of Islam in academic and political discourse, as well as the reduction of Islam to the realm of micropolitics and ethical self-transformation.

Shielke agrees that the accentuation of religious piety may lead to intellectual analysis that privileges a holistic morality instead of the ambivalence and imperfections of every day lives. He makes the provocative statement that “There is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam.”¹²⁸ He is troubled by the academic preoccupation with trying to define Islam – a trend that he does not see regarding other religions. He is wary of the way that current literature on Islam has taken on a life of its own, gaining funding for its attractive message of new religious subjectivity while appropriating its own methodology and disciplinary expectations.¹²⁹ He agrees with Soares and Osello that the study of Islam needs to incorporate the heterogeneity of religious identity in the lives of Muslims and cautions against overly theoretical research that ignores the quotidian, existential quality of Muslims’ lives. He says,

Islam, like any major faith, is not simply something – it is a part of people’s lives, thoughts, acts, societies, histories and more. Consequently, it can be many different things – a moral idiom, a practice of self-care, a discursive tradition, an aesthetic

124. Soares and Osello, “Islam, Politics, Anthropology,” S11.

125. Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 1.

126. Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 2.

sensibility, a political ideology, a mystical quest, a source of hope, a cause of anxiety, an identity, an enemy – you name it.¹³⁰

Moreover, Schielke believes that a narrow theoretical focus on a particular group of committed Muslims, while important, can serve to take away academic analysis about the majority of Muslims who understand their religious identities differently. He goes on to say:

Focussing on the very pious in moments when they are being very pious (in mosque study groups, for example) risks taking those moments when people talk about religion as religious persons (at different times, they can talk about very different things and enact rather different sides of their personality) as the paradigmatic ones, and thus unwittingly reproducing the particular ideological aspiration of Islamist and Islamic revivalist movements: the privileging of Islam as the supreme guideline of all fields of life.¹³¹

Schielke acknowledges the value of the literature on religious piety but believes the way it has been taken up as the authoritative version of religious agency, and has achieved a hegemonic status in academic discourse, can be a disservice to other versions of Islamic life.

Bangstad concurs that a rigid conceptualization of morality can be problematic in that it ignores complexities and misrepresents religious women. He is particularly concerned that Mahmood does not interrogate the context of Salafism as an ideological phenomenon with political and economic impact on Egyptian society, thus presenting the women of the mosque movement in a dehistoricized, decontextualized light. This can lead to a kind of culturalism, with Muslim women depicted as the radical others of Western secularism and liberalism. I have already discussed how Mahmood's elision of secularism with liberalism is inaccurate and serves to set up conceptual strawmen instead of showing overlapping historical and ideological currents. Furthermore, Bangstad critiques the negative implications for feminism of

127.Schielke, "Second thoughts," 2.

128.Schielke, "Second thoughts," 2.

ethnography about Muslim women in which they are shown to be complicit with patriarchal structures as a part of their religious duty. He sees this as a failure to practice a thick, textured ethnographic account of the women.¹³² While he acknowledges that Mahmood does not endorse the kind of performative religious agency she describes, he believes she does not take seriously the ramifications of her theory for progressive feminist politics. He states: “There simply is no way of reconciling feminism with a perspective which appears to prioritize the ‘preservation of life forms’ over women’s rights.”¹³³ According to Bangstad, Mahmood’s project to preserve and legitimize all possible forms of agency, while professing to be a defense of religious women, may actually work against their struggles for feminist rights. While Bangstad is correct that Mahmood’s pious agency is not directed towards progressive politics (as Mahmood never claims to do), he does not give her credit for her the foundation of religious agency that she allows for; my purpose here is not to say that religious agency is always progressive, but that it has the potential to be both rational and feminist, thus disproving the secular binary.

After describing anthropological engagements with Muslim women’s agency in the past few decades, Sehlirkoglu calls for an epistemological understanding of agency that goes beyond structures of family, the state, and discursive traditions. As such, she agrees with Schielke that ascetic notions of religion can overshadow a more complex and holistic understanding of religious lives. She accentuates understandings of selfhood, such as aspirations, imagination, and pleasure, as crucial to a robust sense of agency. Her own work seeks to utilize ethnography to showcase religious women’s negotiated religious identities as they seek to navigate multiple

129. Bangstad, “Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism,” 34.

130. Bangstad, “Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism,” 42.

oppressive structures such as neoliberalism, nationalism and religion.¹³⁴ Dokumaci also calls for an expanded notion of religious agency that can make room for creative individual choices in women's lives that are not constrained by the secular binary of being either religious/oppressed or feminist/rational. In her ethnographic research on religious women in Turkey, she did not see these women as representative of these stark binaries. She states: "I propose that pious feminist narratives call additionally for a relational approach to pious women's subjectivity and autonomy, reformulated in a way that does not locate Islamic piety and feminism as fundamentally separate knowledges, or as distinct and/or separate routes to pious women's agentic action."¹³⁵ While she recognizes the important contribution of Mahmood's pious agency, she believes that "her critique continues to operate within the dichotomous framework set by the Western liberal progressive imaginary itself, which locates a certain individualistic understanding of autonomy on one end and all the rest on the other."¹³⁶ The pious feminists in her study had Islamic interpretations of feminism and but also feminist interpretations of Islam – these overlapping perspectives show the commensurability of apparently contradictory ideologies. She would also like to see an expanded notion of religious piety that can include creativity, critical agency and relational autonomy. Regarding the latter, she articulates that "pious feminist narratives... encourage us to rethink choice in relational terms: constituted but not determined by pious women's actual interpersonal relationships as well as relationships with different discursive traditions including but not limited to Islamic

131. Sehlirkoglu, "Revisited: Muslim Women's agency," 85.

132. Dokumaci, "Toward a Relational Approach?" 2.

133. Dokumaci, "Toward a Relational Approach?" 15.

piety.”¹³⁷ For Dokumaci, relational autonomy need not be just individualistic or just compliant and can pervade secular binaries that relegate religion to only non-oppositional modalities.

These authors seek to interrogate and build on the pious agency described by Mahmood and to show that her theory, when applied to actual Muslim women and society, can be harmful and inaccurately describe the fullness of their autonomy and life choices. Not only does the secular bias in academia make it difficult to talk about religion (aside from specialized religious studies departments), racialized students and faculty who wish to research religion are faced with institutional and epistemological barriers. The authors who critique religious piety question the accuracy of this literature and the hegemonic status it has achieved in academia, especially as it may not speak to the concerns of the majority of Muslim women and their self-understandings. There appears to be a direct correlation between the secular bias in the academy and the authoritative representations of Muslim women’s agency that are reproduced and reified within it without an adequate consideration of whether the theory aligns with praxis, or lived experience. This is less a critique of the literature, which has indeed opened up space in this project for the critique of Western binaries, but of the ivory tower when it creates knowledge that is not self-reflexive and becomes disconnected from the object of study. To avoid elitist forms of theory, academic discourse needs to be grounded in community in a responsible, dialectical and fluid way that can incorporate changes and continue to grow.

Expanding (Muslim) Women’s Agency

134. Dokumaci, “Toward a Relational Approach?” 14.

To rectify the one-dimensional view of religious women's agency, I will present other analyses of agency or autonomy that can contain multiple expressions and dimensions. As this project aims to ultimately expand particularized conceptualizations of women's agency for more universal ones, I approach the topic of women's agency from a feminist perspective, instead of as a purely religious question. As will become apparent in later chapters, I seek to situate religious women alongside other women and show that feminist agency can be multifarious and complex. Academic research must then attest to this complexity, instead of seeking to slot it into narrow categories. In making this argument, I lean on feminist research that has highlighted the way that women have historically been excluded from Western political theory due to their lack of rationality.¹³⁸ A robust envisioning of feminist theory, beyond token gestures of intersectionality, can include even religious women and can interrogate academic discourse that does not represent women's lived experiences and struggles.

Liberal notions of autonomy have not adequately reflected the relational quality of individual lives. It is no surprise, then, that feminist understandings of autonomy have similarly been inadequate in Western societies influenced by liberal theory. Cynthia Willett points out that the rational autonomous ideal of liberal society does not consider the way that agency is cultivated through social connections and obligations to others.¹³⁹ Code is also critical about

the autonomy-saturated theories and rhetoric that infuse affluent western social-political spaces at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This rhetoric, I will argue, holds in place a regulative autonomy ideal whose effects, paradoxically, are as coercive

135. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking*.

136. Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 7.

as they are liberating, as effective in sustaining oppression and subjection as in inspiring release from heteronomy.¹⁴⁰

She gestures to the ironic and illusory impact of the rational autonomy ideal in the lives of the marginalized, who are not able to partake of the social positions and advantages that are a prerequisite for agency, according to this model. She reminds us that history has shown that it has been common for those in Western societies who claim autonomy to impose epistemological and political control over those who are deemed oppressed, or unable to understand their own interests.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, the ideas of consent and choice at the basis of the rational autonomy ideal are not accurate or feasible in reality. Butler emphasizes that there is no free choice outside of power, contingency and social obligations; even when we “choose” a relationship, we can’t know what possible outcomes we have consented to. She states:

Those lives which exceed me and are not a matter of my choosing are a condition of who I am, and so there is no life that is exclusively my own.... We are finally creatures of life, including creatures of passion, who need what we cannot fully understand or choose, and whose sexual and emotional lives are marked from the start from this being bound up with one another with unknowing and necessity.¹⁴²

Butler shows that the rigid autonomy in liberal models can fetishize choice, or consent, and ignores the way our lives are formed through our relationships and obligations to others.

Although I will criticize her model of performative agency (and its adaptation in the postcolonial literature on religious agency) for feminist theory in the next chapter, I think her rebuttal of liberal versions of autonomy that take the atomistic, male individual as the norm is very cogent. In the context of critiques of Muslim women’s agency, Abu-Lughod is also sensitive to the ways

137. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 164-5.

138. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 172.

139. Judith Butler, “Sexual Consent: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis and Law,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 21, no. 2 (2011): 428-9.

that terms such as freedom and choice are not able to capture the full contradictions and complications of these women's lives, and alternate narratives are unintelligible due to the dominant liberal model of autonomy.¹⁴³ Brown agrees that judging Muslim women according to the rational autonomy ideal ignores "the extent to which all choice is conditioned by as well as imbricated with power, and the extent to which choice itself is an impoverished account of freedom."¹⁴⁴ Sehlikoglu shows the thorny terrain in literature about Muslim women's agency due to its imbrication in larger historical narratives:

On the one hand the preoccupation with agency, (ie. an exclusive focus on it) in studies on the women in the Middle East runs the risk of evoking the colonial narrative and feminist and queer scholars need to be aware of that. However, on the other hand, those colonial narratives are in fact embedded into the very epistemology of area studies which is why they keep haunting academic scholastic view at many levels. Due to the politics of epistemology as a feminist issue (Alcoff 1993¹⁴⁵), it is not only hard, but also politically impossible for the feminist scholarship to avoid reflecting on agency, at different levels and different ways, in different times.¹⁴⁶

The topic of women's autonomy is an ongoing intellectual debate, and more work needs to be done to wrestle it away from the rational autonomy ideal that continues to dominate the discussion around what women are capable of and what they should strive for. Questions of agency, or autonomy, are particularly troublesome for Muslim women, who seem to fall on the wrong side of freedom, necessitating alternative understandings of agency that do not replicate harmful binaries.

140. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 26, 216.

141. Wendy Brown, "Civilizational Delusions: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality," *Theory and Event* 15, no. 2 (2012).

142. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, "Introduction: When feminisms intersect epistemology" in *Feminist Epistemologies* eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (Routledge: 1993) quoted in Sehlikoglu, "Revisited: Muslim Women's agency," 87.

143. Sehlikoglu, "Revisited: Muslim Women's agency," 87.

One way to do this is to focus on our mutual interdependence as human beings. As Butler and Brown have also alluded to, an emphasis on mutual relationships instead of independent rational beings can mitigate some of the excesses of the liberal model. Eva Kittay states:

An ethics that puts the autonomous individual at the forefront, that eclipses the importance of our dependence on one another, and that makes reciprocal exchanges between equals, rather than the attention to other's needs, the model of ethical interaction is not one to be preferred in the construction of an ethics of inclusion – at least not without the correction of an ethic of care.¹⁴⁷

Including care and interdependence as human needs and incorporating an ethics of care can help broaden narrow conceptions of agency. The authors of *The Care Manifesto* highlight the way that our politics need to acknowledge our need for others if we are to create a better, socialist society.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Kathi Weeks envisions a society in which care is considered a vital political need that can transform the reproduction of life in a democratic community.¹⁴⁹ Sarah Clark Miller is another author who stresses the human need for interdependence; she couches this need in moral terms when she proposes “that our human interdependence and finitude give rise to an obligation to care for a certain subset of needs, namely, the constitutive needs of others.”¹⁵⁰ For Miller, our mutual need for nurture and aid gives rise to a moral obligation to help others, and she frames this using Kant's duty of beneficence. Jennifer Nedelsky's research on relational autonomy also touches on interdependence when she emphasizes “mutually

144. Eva Kittay, “The Ethics of Care, Dependence and Disability,” *Ratio Juris* vol. 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 51.

145. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 6.

146. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Anti-work Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 230.

147. Sarah Clark Miller, “Need, Care and Obligation,” in *The Philosophy of Need*, ed. Soran Reader (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 137.

interacting relationships that are a part of a nested structure from intimate to global.”¹⁵¹ She includes the community, institutional structures, and discursive traditions in her encompassing view of relationality. These authors all bring issues of care to the forefront of human needs and politics, thus providing a welcome intervention into the atomistic society made up of rational autonomous individuals.

Other authors have proposed different understandings of subjectivity that push the boundaries of the (male) autonomous ideal. In *Constituting Feminist Subjects*, Weeks constructs a new theoretical model of subjectivity that does not overemphasize individual autonomy and that keeps in mind social structures:

In the absence of some sense of the whole, some conception of the complex social formations that constitute and constrain subjects, we end up with an impoverished model of the subject that overestimates its capacities for self-creation and self-transformation, as well as a very limited understanding of the forces we must subvert in order to make possible the construction of alternative subjects.¹⁵²

She is adamant that without an accurate understanding of feminist subjectivity as a part of totality, it will not be possible to resist current oppressive structures and to enact a new, socialist politics. Her book elaborates on the “construction of antagonistic subjects with dreams, passions, and interests at odds with the existing order of things, subjects with the will and the capacity to seek alternatives,”¹⁵³ and this can only be accomplished through a different kind of feminist subjectivity. Luce Irigaray also argues for a new kind of feminist subjectivity – one that is not encumbered by the male phallic economy. She outlines how the male symbol

148. Jennifer Nedelsky, “Law’s relations for comparative perspective,” in *A comparative approach around Jennifer Nedelsky*, ed. Jean-Francois Braunstein and Emmanuel Jeuland (Paris: IRJS Editions, 2018), 15.

149. Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 4.

150. Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects*, 10.

comes to serve as the only viable option for women, who must conform to male expectations. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, she asks, “How can women analyze their own exploitation, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine? Is a women's politics possible within that order? What transformation in the political process itself does it require?”¹⁵⁴ According to Irigaray, women need to separate themselves from dominant male systems to articulate their own feminine values. Lois McNay is another feminist theorist who is critical of what she sees as passive Foucauldian agency and reiterates the call for a more generative and creative subjectivity for women.¹⁵⁵ This subjectivity is more grounded than the Butlerian theory of performativity because it is more dynamic and complex, even as it is a unified sense of agency. These authors articulate new visions for feminist subjectivity that challenge the status quo representation of the rational and autonomous male subject.

In the sphere of psychoanalysis, there are some strong critiques of male psychological traits as they are exhibited in individuals and society. Although psychoanalysis has traditionally been considered a male domain, and Freud has been criticized for his male-centric view of development and sexuality, many women are now using psychoanalytic tools to understand the nature of societal domination. Ilene Philipson demonstrates that the field of psychotherapy has seen a massive shift in the past few decades from being a male-centred profession to a primarily women’s field. Similarly, the field of psychoanalysis has slowly seen a paradigm shift

151. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 81.

152. Lois L. McNay, *Gender and agency: Reconfiguring the subject in feminist and social theory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 140-1.

from drive theory to a relational model.¹⁵⁶ In *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*, Jessica Benjamin argues that the gender polarity that underpins Western society can be traced to unconscious processes that begin to take shape in early childhood. According to Benjamin, the tendency for male domination and female submission is so anchored into our collective psyche that it is hard to recognize, let alone to try to ameliorate this dynamic.¹⁵⁷ This developmental and cultural phenomenon impacts women differently, by depriving them of subjectivity. The social implication of this basic inequality results in a society in which recognition loses importance, and “feminine” qualities such as compassion and cooperation are undermined. She proposes an intersubjective model which will recognize the human need for recognition from the other, to complement the intrapsychic model traditionally supported by psychoanalysis. Focusing on both internal and external worlds can give a complementary and more holistic view of the psyche that incorporates our deeply social characteristics. Other authors emphasize the role of desire, pleasure and fantasy in producing subjectivity.¹⁵⁸ Sehlkoglou asserts: “Desire, as a human capacity, provides one of the venues through which individuals seek possibilities which makes it essential in understanding agency.”¹⁵⁹ Locating universal human characteristics of human subjectivity can help expand our notions of agency considering our psychological and social needs.

153. Ilene J. Philipson, *On the Shoulders of Women: The Feminization of Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

154. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 8.

155. H. L. Moore, *A passion for difference: Essays in anthropology and gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); J. Glynos and Y. Stavrakakis, “Lacan and political subjectivity: Fantasy and enjoyment in psychoanalysis and political theory,” *Subjectivity* 24 no. 1 (2008); L. Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture* (London: Duke University Press, 2007).

156. Sehlkoglou, “Revisited: Muslim Women’s agency,” 86.

These varied theoretical perspectives on broadening our view of agency and autonomy can help push back against singular conceptualizations of women’s agency by highlighting complexity and diversity. Although these authors do not directly address religious agency, I position religious women alongside other women to pose feminist critiques of limited views of women’s agency. I do not differentiate religious agency as a separate kind of agency with its own unique methodology and disciplinary discretion. Aspects of autonomy that seem irrational or subjective based on current liberal models do not convey a problem with particular women’s agency but with the hegemony of the model. I would like to situate conversations about religious women “within” feminist epistemological critiques instead of creating a separate discursive and intellectual space for them due to their exceptionality – I believe feminism can incorporate these differences and a better model of “universal” feminist agency can help us accomplish this. Some writers have utilized more universal theoretical lenses with which to view aspects of Islam. For example, Fethi Benslama is a psychoanalyst who believes that an analysis of Muslim collective identity, through both the psyche and materiality, can help us make sense of some cultural and political trends. According to him,

We must think of Islam as both finite and infinite, in order to distinguish the Islam of theology, whose system is historically complete, from an extension that is stripped of religious manifestations but that incorporates certain fundamental characteristics – ethical and poetic – in its opening up to the world.¹⁶⁰

In other words, ample attention must be paid to human needs and desires to mitigate against repressions and to reach a subjectivization that better allows for cultural transformation from within, against the trauma of modernity. Schielke believes an existential approach to agency

157. Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2009), 42.

can better help us capture the nature of religious impulses and the way they are mitigated, and strengthened, by other negotiated aspects of identity. He argues:

To understand the complex logic of lived experience, we will have to take the inherent ambiguity of people's lives as the starting point, just as we have to locate their world-views in both the local contexts they are physically acting in as well as the global connections, both imagined and enacted, they locate themselves in. These are not merely exceptions from some kind of normality; on the contrary they are the normality of people's lives – even those who at times argue for holistic and perfectionist ideologies.¹⁶¹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, existentialism entails a radical responsibility in the face of an uncertain world; while religious belief can provide solace in the face of uncertainty, it does not guarantee that we can escape the human predicament of having to make informed choices and make our own way in the world. Schielke also offers insights into the nature of populism to explain the behaviour of Muslims after the Danish cartoon incident of 2005.

Instead of cultural or religious understandings of why Muslims across the world reacted the way that they did, he contextualizes their behaviour as a moralistic and personalized way of expressing existential anxieties, alongside the rise of populism in other parts of the world.¹⁶²

Although I will not go into details about this comparison, it is productive to posit research about Muslims as normal human experiences with multiple possible theoretical interpretations instead of as aberrations to the norm. Schielke comments that the ways that people live Islam “may not be so dramatically different from the ways they live capitalism and love.”¹⁶³ While this may seem like a provocative statement, he is drawing attention away from a narrow focus on religious morality to the multiple overlapping (and sometimes contradictory) forces that

¹⁶¹ Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 3.

¹⁶² Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 8.

¹⁶³ Schielke, “Second thoughts,” 14.

influence the formation of religious identity in modernity. It may be useful to differentiate here between Mahmood's view that religious agency is performative, embodied and cultivated through ethical formation, from the expanded notion of agency proposed here which is also impacted by external structures, but that ultimately retains a sense of responsibility and autonomy along the lines of rationality and humanism, that are the hallmarks of secularism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sketched the landscape of feminism to situate the literature on Muslim women's agency, touching on the importance of the postsecular turn within feminism, while also describing the external and internal difficulties feminism has had in incorporating women's difference. A brief outline of anthropological engagement with Muslim women and agency was given, in which the recent postcolonial literature on religious women's agency was situated. After this, three different works from within this literature were discussed in more detail: Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety*, and Bilge's "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women." Using the context of a secular bias established in the previous chapter, these works were then shown to demonstrate the bias of religion/oppression/irrationality vs. secularism/humanism/rationality, to various degrees. This bias prevented the analysis of religious agency along the lines of rational, multidimensional and relational understandings. Working together, the three pieces effectively show a varied but complementary range of works to establish precursors of pious religious agency as well as its applications in politics. The problem of a secular binary was shown to be a problem of academic discourse, using critiques from various authors who show the limitations of a focus on pious religious agency. There are

institutional, methodological and epistemological difficulties for research on religion in the academy, especially for Muslim women. The disjuncture between academic discourse on religious women and descriptions of their lived experience shows a stark difference between elitist forms of theorization and its praxis. The literature on pious religious agency has been contextualized, examined, and critiqued in this chapter, with some initial suggestions about alternative theorizations that can expand notions of agency. In the next chapter, I will delve into a more theoretical discussion about poststructuralist feminism, to build the normative case for a feminist universalism that can form a foundation for an expanded understanding of religious agency.

Chapter 3 - Universalism as a Normative Goal for Feminism

When I do not see plurality stressed in the very structure of a theory, I know that I will have to do lots of acrobatics—like a contortionist or tight-rope walker— to have this theory speak to me without allowing the theory to distort me *in my complexity*.¹

The previous chapter sketched the landscape of (English-speaking, liberal) feminist theory and situated the work on religious agency within it, showing its strengths and weaknesses. I ultimately seek to build on these embodied and performative notions of religious agency with more universal values. Religious agency, as it is conceptualized by authors such as Mahmood, rests on feminist poststructuralist theory, as articulated by Butler and other thinkers. Poststructuralism has emerged as a major critique of uncritical forms of Enlightenment universalism and emphasizes the instability of meaning, critiquing grand narratives that impose control on those who do not conform to its dictates. Historically, poststructuralism and its related field of postcolonialism, both highlight notions of power that oppress, silence and marginalize those who are deemed different, or Other. This problem from within Western humanism is reinscribed in (Western) feminist theory, which can replicate these universalizing tendencies.² In the previous chapter, internal and external problems of difference within feminism were expanded on. Poststructuralist feminism has been integral to the critique of liberal feminism and its oppressive norms of rational male autonomy. Yet dismissing grand narratives altogether can also be detrimental for feminist goals.

This chapter will make the case for a nuanced universalism as a normative goal for feminism. This, in turn, can help broaden the horizons of feminist religious agency as it is

1. Maria C. Lugones, "On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism" in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 43.

2. Linda Nicholson, "Introduction" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1.

conceived of through poststructuralist feminist theory. The title of this dissertation is “Left Universalism: Muslim Feminist Ethics,” so it is necessary to explain this term. As Sekyi-Otu explains in his book *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays*, “The name of this work is left universalism. Its enabling resources and inciting symbols being at once native particulars and human commonalities, the postcolonial condition – this time and place of radical need – makes reaffirming and reinventing it as the language of radical criticism and vision of regeneration nothing less than imperative.”³ Although Sekyi-Otu’s argument focuses on cultural universalisms, it can also be used in the case of feminism to argue for a language with which to describe “particulars and human commonalities” amongst women in capitalist modernity that can lead to utopian imaginaries and political strategies. Sekyi-Otu’s concept is unique in that it utilizes a traditionally Eurocentric concept – universalism – as a tool in the hands of non-Western cultures to bring out organic and generative theoretical ideals that lead to progressive social and political change. Within poststructural and postcolonial studies, universalism has (rightfully) been deemed suspect in projects of Western cultural and political domination. However, Sekyi-Otu points out that condemning universalism as an imposition ultimately prevents non-Western peoples from reclaiming parts of their tradition that overlap with “Western” values. Sekyi-Otu presents the issue of the human as the basis for a transcendental understanding of universal values (this will be expanded on further in the next chapter).

Within Sekyi-Otu’s articulation of left universalism, we find a dialectical relationship between particularity and universalism that does not reduce either phenomenon to

3. Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 37.

essentializations or caricatures. Indeed, the tension between universality and particularity is an ontological, epistemological and metaphysical dynamic that is at the background of many of the discussions thus far, such as rationality/relationality, theory/praxis, individual/community and even the secular/religion binary. A robust enunciation of the productive tension and interplay between particularity and universality in any theoretical engagement can offer a more nuanced and co-constitutive relationship that can avoid the replication of simplistic binaries. Since the aforementioned literature on feminist religious agency also rests on assumptions and critiques about universal and particular norms, this chapter will examine this debate from the perspective of feminist poststructuralism, ultimately proposing different theoretical frameworks to assert new, creative possibilities of religious agency. I will begin by discussing the emergence of poststructuralism through authors such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Antonio, Sheldon Wolin and David McNally. Then I will situate feminist poststructuralism within this larger intellectual trend, bringing out debates of possible convergences and divergences between feminism and poststructuralism. I will then present alternatives to feminist poststructuralism through feminist theoretical frameworks that allow for a more nuanced and mediational relationship between universalism and particularity. Specifically, I detail Code's efforts to expand the scope of feminist epistemology, Serene Khader and Irigaray's tempering of universalisms for feminist goals, McNay and Theodor Adorno's perspectives of feminist political agency through identity theory (Adorno being interpreted through Renee Heberle and Gillian Howie), and Himani Bannerji's Marxist feminist methodology. Through this trajectory of feminist poststructuralism and some feminist alternatives, I hope to open conceptual space in

feminist theory within which to articulate Muslim women's agency in terms not predetermined by poststructuralist commitments to difference.

The Emergence of Poststructuralism

The intellectual current of poststructuralism is elusive and difficult to pin down. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will use the terms poststructuralism and postmodernism interchangeably, unless indicated otherwise, for the sake of clarity (although I will also discuss why this is problematic later). Broadly speaking, postmodernism encompasses a broader sensibility and way of life, including such practices as art, while poststructuralism is more specific and pertains to a philosophical approach that includes a theory of language. The term "postmodernism" was first coined by Lyotard in 1979 in a book commissioned by the Conseil des Universités du Québec as a study about the impact of science and technology in "the most highly developed societies."⁴ He states: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodernism* as incredulity toward metanarratives."⁵ With this definition and through his book entitled *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, his work introduced the term into philosophy and social sciences. The different cultural and epistemological spheres of postmodernism and poststructuralism are difficult to carve up accurately. In his view, this is indicative of the nature of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought as an antithesis to the rigidity of modernity and structuralism. A commentator says, "The lack of clear definition reflects the purposeful elusiveness of work that can be variously classified as poststructural and/or postmodern: Perhaps the most important hallmark of all this work is its aversion to clean positivist

4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiii.

5. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv. Original italics.

definitions and categories.” Nevertheless, he distinguishes postmodernism as “theory of society, culture and history” and aligns it with thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, while he sees poststructuralism as “a theory of knowledge and language” and designates Jacques Derrida and French feminists Julia Kristeva, Irigaray and Helene Cisoux as notable poststructuralist thinkers.⁶

While it is difficult in the scope of this chapter to do a detailed overview of the broad phenomena of “structuralism” and “modernism,” the problematic aspect for postmodernism is their tendency towards metanarratives, as Lyotard describes, or totalitarian thinking. Antonio describes the profound sense of despair in the postwar period after grand notions of progress for humanity seemed to be at a crossroads with the harsh realities of modern life. He explains that postmodernism, and its related neoliberalism “were responses to an eroding postwar economic, political, and sociocultural complex and to failed beliefs in modernization.”⁷ Some of the frustrations regarding modernity are that its

quasi-evolutionary warranties about sociocultural progress, whether directly in the form of grand theory or tacitly as “value-free” scientism, merely dress absolutism in scientific garb and, thus, undermine dialogue about modernity’s conflictive values, crisis tendencies, and repressive features.⁸

Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” theory is yet another manifestation of the post-war despair for utopian visions. He believed that there were no other valid alternatives to liberal democracy and its dependency on markets.⁹ The dissolution of the Soviet Union served to reify this belief that not only were liberal democracies the only remaining path forward, but that

6. Ben Agger, “Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 112.

7. Robert J. Antonio, “After Postmodernism: Reactionary Tribalism,” *AJS* 106, no. 2 (July 2000): 70.

8. Antonio, “After Postmodernism,” 76.

9. Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* no. 16 (Summer 1989).

they were inherently peaceful and thus superior to other (non-Western) political systems.¹⁰

Lyotard, as well as Weber, analyzed and critiqued post-industrial bureaucracy and the “iron cage” of rationalization in Western society,¹¹ but both were unwilling or unable to provide

alternatives to the all-encompassing characteristics of modern capitalist society. Antonio

describes three themes that arose in the post-war turn from modernization theory to

postmodernism: autoreferential culture, antiuniversalism and cultural politics.¹² The second

theme of antiuniversalist sentiments that undergird theories of postmodernism are most

pertinent to this chapter, and will be discussed in detail. As Antonio explains, antiuniversalism

opposes the alleged regimenting, homogenizing force of universal values, concepts, laws, and policies and manifests a deep suspicion or outright denial of cross-group consensus. This particularist current is amplified by Derridian and Lyotardian mantras about waging "war on totality," celebrating "difference," and embracing "local knowledge." Antiuniversalism runs counter to the "grand narratives" that legitimized modernization and attributed it general significance.¹³

The aversion towards metanarratives and “grand narratives” can lead to a corresponding

disintegration and disunity in the social sphere. Sometimes referred to as “identity politics,”

individual and group identities are seen as incommensurable with societal and political unity.

The goal of politics thus becomes to mitigate between different separate interests with an

artificial celebration of difference while stark colonial, gendered, racial and other inequalities

persist. We can see this in the supposed Canadian affinity towards multiculturalism¹⁴ as well as

10. Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs, Part 2” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 4 (Autumn, 1983).

11. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

12. Antonio, “After Postmodernism,” 50-1.

13. Antonio, “After Postmodernism,” 51.

14. Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto, Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2000).

lobbying by interest groups in which different groups seek recognition from the state. Antonio is critical about the impact of antiuniversalist sentiments on social unity and progressive politics. He sees this theme of postmodernism as affecting the social, political and economic spheres; for example, the advent of neoliberalism and its ethos of free markets, privatization and competition is quite compatible with antiuniversalism.

Antonio further describes different theoretical responses to postmodernism, correlating to different levels of impact of the three themes he outlined earlier. His focus is on what he calls “strong-program postmodernism,” which

poses a "total critique of modernity".... Strong-program postmodernism abandons all "truth" claims, viewing social theory and science exclusively as narratives, rejecting references to "realities" external to the theoretical text, and dismissing "objective" inquiry about the "validity" of theories or how well they represent "reality."¹⁵

Since theories are viewed in this version of postmodernism as, at best, skewed representations of socially-constructed reality and, at worse, capable of marginalizing and oppressing differences, there is no normative basis for intersubjective discussion or consensus. He also outlines a second “depoliticized” version of strong program modernization which features a more radical relativism and skepticism towards cultural and social cohesiveness. He highlights the contributions of Baudrillard towards this radical version of postmodernism, who viewed no possible position of objectivity away from language and the dissolution of all reality into “floating signifiers.” In this second version,

"progressive" facets of history are not distinguishable from their opposites. All dissolves into pure contingency, ending communication, meaning, and sociality and foreclosing the basic democratic presupposition that people are capable of absorbing information,

15. Antonio, “After Postmodernism,” 52-3.

digesting it critically, and employing it reasonably in citizenship, popular sovereignty, and social cooperation.¹⁶

For Antonio, this second version is even more problematic in its chaotic view of human capability and politics. He is especially concerned about the implications of strong program postmodernism in promoting what he calls “reactionary tribalism,” or a “neopopulist resurgence of group identities anchored in ethnic community”¹⁷ which can lead to conservative ideology and right-wing extremism. Writing in 2000, Antonio impressively grasps the nature of postmodernist theory and the influence it would have on the cultural and political landscape, such as in current-day far-right intellectual critiques of globalization, liberalism and social democracy.

Interestingly, Antonio nuances his critique in a footnote by describing “weak program” or “reflexive postmodernism,” which can remediate some of the excesses of strong program postmodernism. He also connects this strand of postmodern thought with elements of modernism, thus showing some convergences between the two instead of constructing them as polar opposites. Highlighting the critical elements of postmodernism aligns with the goals of this chapter, which is not to show dichotomous theoretical camps but to elucidate ways of reconciling apparently contradictory theoretical perspectives of particularity and universalism. In Antonio’s words,

Reflexive postmodernism acknowledges power-knowledge, simulation, and cultural difference and criticizes unreflexive modern theories accordingly. By contrast to the strong program, however, it does not hold that postmodernization requires that modern epistemology and communicative ideals be dumped... Addressing critically

16. Antonio, “After Postmodernism,” 54.

17. Antonio, “After Postmodernism,” 55.

technocratic, scientific, and antidemocratic aspects of postwar modernization, reflexive postmodernism qualifies, specifies, and historicizes theory and science.¹⁸

According to Antonio, reflexive postmodernism can be seen to build on and correct aspects of modernism that are arrogant, such as overweening accounts of Enlightenment reason. But it can do so through internal criticism and dialogue instead of negating normativity itself as suspect. Moreover, the postmodernists

hold that modern theory has been rife with particularist biases (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, gender, colonial blindspots) and has failed to follow through in practice on the ethical universalism or ethical neutrality that it endorses in the abstract. They claim that it often "totalizes" hegemonic cultural views, helping repress difference and harden domination.¹⁹

Antonio states that while some of these critiques of modernism can be exaggerated, they accentuate definitive problems with the modern tradition that need to be addressed if the positive aspects of modern theory are to be relevant for our "postmodern" condition. He agrees that we must take the best parts of modern and postmodern theory if we are to reconcile some of the blind spots of the past but retain value for normativity and some form of universalism. He wants to retain the significance of "social theory," which

poses broad questions about the "value" of different directions of sociocultural development, knowledge, and policy... It has philosophical presuppositions, but it debates normative matters primarily on the basis of existent, nascent, or possible sociocultural conditions and, thus, draws on social-scientific theories, concepts, and research.²⁰

In contrast to social theory, Antonio posits "sociological theory," which he sees as largely having "empirical, hermeneutic, or analytical intent and middle-range disciplinary focus."²¹ He is

18. Antonio, "After Postmodernism," 53.

19. Antonio, "After Postmodernism," 76.

20. Antonio, "After Postmodernism," 77.

21. Antonio, "After Postmodernism," 77.

concerned that the wide-ranging influence of postmodern theory has led to the dismissal of social theory since it has a normative thrust and is thus deemed suspect of flattening out the very real differences among individuals. He reiterates that sociological theory and social theory have different methods and functions and need to complement each other. Discrediting all social theory as intrinsically oppressive has detrimental social and political consequences because there is no point of objectivity by which we can judge the inclinations and direction of society. Harkening back to my earlier discussion of the tension between theory and praxis, the challenge is to avoid dogmatism in theory or with positivistic approaches, instead being cognizant about the shortcomings of either approach and seeking to utilize a dialectical method. Antonio is not the only author who sees in extreme versions of postmodern theory a threat to theory, philosophy and disciplines with a normative approach.

Wolin is also concerned that postmodern thought precludes normativity and is thus detrimental for social and political goals. Through a detailed analysis of Foucault, he critiques postmodernism's lack of rigorous theory and counters it. According to Wolin, Foucault is critical of theory because it "signified in his eyes a totalizing system of thought, an all-inclusiveness that was at once authoritarian and ignorant. Theory professed to explain all phenomena when it was merely transposing them to a plane of abstract generality whose terms it controlled."²² For Foucault, theory not only detracts from everyday meanings and relationships, but is inaccurate and imposes its own control on both knowledge and people. For this reason, it is better to focus on quotidian practices of power and discourse than on abstract notions. Wolin

22. Sheldon S. Wolin and Nicholas Xenos. *Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 284.

critiques Foucault's postmodernism through his concepts of discourse, power, and his untenable understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. He introduces the central dilemma of democracy in industrial society – this version of democracy is plagued with the centrality of the state, technical knowledge and private policy-making in which “change is institutionalized and manufactured” and citizens who oppose the status quo have very little leverage.²³ For Foucault, the solution to this predicament is through a wholesale critique of power relations through the nexus of power and knowledge, which he thought would allow us to critique centralized notions of power as well as the entire edifice of theory, since it is not traditionally compatible with practice. Foucault sought to do this through the concept of a discursive formation, which

consists of practices and institutions that produce knowledge claims that the system of power finds useful. A specific discourse serves a maieutic function: it brings objects into being by identifying them, delimiting their field, and specifying them, as when psychiatry declares schizophrenics to exist and to be the objects of psychiatric therapies. Objects of knowledge are defined in ways that converging practices can use: the practices of the criminologist, the psychiatrist, the hospital administrator, and the legislator. Thus a discursive formation unites thought and practice in a seamless and circular web: Practices set the conditions for discourse and discourse feeds back statements that will facilitate practice.²⁴

I have quoted at length because the importance of discourse in Foucault's thought cannot be overstated. Wolin shows the linkages between the Foucauldian concepts of discourse and practice, the latter of which will be crucial for my discussion on the postmodern skepticism towards theory. Discourse analysis also figured prominently in the description of the pious women in Mahmood's study, who moulded themselves according to “historically contingent

23. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 286.

24. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 287.

discursive traditions.”²⁵ According to Wolin, the concept of discursive formation, since it distinguishes itself from explicitly political notions of power, precludes radical forms of resistance and change. Instead of a statist or generalized view of politics, Foucault prefers a localized perspective in which people are formed in and through power. For Wolin, the concept of discourse is problematic in that it blurs the distinction between power as an oppressive and productive notion, rendering politics ineffectual. He says:

So closely are knowledge and power associated that it is difficult to say whether Foucault’s legacy is primarily a politics of discourse rather than a discourse about politics or whether it is a discourse in which each is absorbed into the other and transformed by it: politics becomes discourse and discourse politics.²⁶

If any notion of a general or public politics is unintelligible, it will be impossible to differentiate between better and worse forms of democracy, and to resist oppressive kinds of politics.

Wolin also expands on the Foucauldian concept of power, which is closely related to discourse. In fact, Foucault was clear that “relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated not implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.”²⁷ Power becomes an all-encompassing theoretical concept and a lens through which to view life, society and politics. As Wolin describes, “[i]n all of its manifestations—words, things, beings, institutions, and relationships—Foucault’s world is suffused with power. There is no social space undefined by power relationships and no socially significant form of power which is not housed. It is a social world totally dominated by

25. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 32.

26. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 287.

27. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 93.

power.”²⁸ Since discourse is grounded in localized forms of power, and power is everywhere, we get a diffuse philosophical perspective that does not give us tools to combat universal forms of oppression such as capitalism, colonialism, sexism or racism. Wolin charges Foucault with creating a new kind of totalitarian thinking (similar to what he charges theory with enacting) through his vague notion of power, even as it attempts to avoid any generalized form of thought. Foucault’s commitment to dispersed notions of power has implications for the application of postmodern thought to fields such as politics, economics and law. As Wolin states: “One of the curiosities of Foucault’s writings is that, despite his fascination with power, nowhere does he systematically analyze its supreme embodiment in modern totalitarianism. He was not directly concerned with great tyranny but with smaller ones.”²⁹ While this localized conceptualization of power allows closer examination of the minutiae of the workings of power, it doesn’t fare so well with more general and state-centric forms of power and Wolin thinks the impact of his thought suffers because of this shortcoming. Not only does Foucault’s framework undermine political action, but it also negates any emancipatory aspect of knowledge and thus makes it difficult to make any normative judgments between different epistemological and political structures. As a result,

all discourse is reduced to the level of positivity at which power and thought reproduce each other. This means that henceforth knowledge lacks the legitimating quality that in earlier centuries had been associated variously with sacred, divine, or ontological origins. In fact its status is virtually indistinguishable from practices because both are rooted in power.³⁰

28. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 288.

29. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 292.

30. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 297.

Foucault's critique of knowledge has implications for political and theoretical projects that propose any kind of progressive norms, and for the validity and potential of theory itself.

As mentioned earlier, Foucault is very skeptical about the benefits of theory, and considers it a totalizing form of thought that would inevitably oppress and control people. The abstract nature of theory is problematic because it is removed from the reality of localized power. Where he does validate theory, he refers to it as a "toolkit" which can help analyze specific workings of power in a given context.³¹ Aside from this utilization of theory as an analytic of power, Foucault believed that "theories display the same 'unitary,' totalizing tendencies as the centralized apparatus of the modern state."³² Wolin believes this "attack" on theory is contradictory since Foucault dismisses the "great theoretical constructs described in histories" because of their imbrication with power.³³ By eliminating any notion of theory that is not consumed within power and specific practices, Foucault performs a grave disservice to the benefits that theoretical work can have in constructing value-judgments and prescribing new ideas for change. Wolin makes the case for theory as a necessary counterpart of action, while not being bound by it. This separate sphere allows for objectivity and accountability when there is a need to prescribe normative values to political life or practices. As he states:

If theory is absorbed into the discourse of action so as to become inseparable, it will be impossible for it to perceive when action has fallen short of what it should be. It is the nature of action to fall short of theory and it is the role of theory to declare that. Theory can only perform that critical function if it retains a separate identity.³⁴

31. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 145.

32. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 292.

33. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 292.

34. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 293.

Without this measure of accountability, there will be no way to ascertain whether action is useful or productive or good, whatever the goal of political life or action is considered to be. Wolin's discussion of Foucault allows us to analyze poststructuralist/postmodern thought in its distaste for generalized forms of theory that do not take into account intimate constructions of power. Antonio was also similarly concerned about the disadvantageous effects of postmodern thought on social theory. For both these thinkers, the influence of postmodernism has an immediate and direct effect on individuals and society. By eliminating theory, the individual becomes unmoored and denied any vantage point other than that of subjectivity and subjection, which is not an accurate description of social life. As Wolin emphasizes:

Theory is valuable not only for being able to locate movements but also for helping to overcome the autistic tendencies of localism and the self-centered preoccupation of the postmodern individual. Theory has been a civic discourse. It has called the self out of the self, beckoned it to a plane of generality which reminds the self in its locality that other beings and other life forms inhabit public space and are bent on establishing their own collective identities. This conception of theory also liberates action from being haunted by theory and absorbed into the notion of practice.³⁵

He describes our social world in which individuals rely on others and need to work collectively to solve societal problems. Extreme, or "strong program" versions of postmodernism that contextualize individuals within webs of power until there is no sense of social good left, are disassociated from political life. Hence, theory is vital for articulating any disjunction between ideals and practical implementation of those ideals; it also allows for more radical and rule-breaking forms of action. The productive tension between theory and practice that Foucault's postmodern thought delegitimizes is a necessary function of critical thinking and broader

35. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 299.

movements for social progress, however it is defined. Just as Antonio conceptualizes a more nuanced version of postmodern thought (what he calls “weak program postmodernism”) that can reconcile the strengths of both traditional theory and postmodern critiques, Wolin also posits a critical version of postmodern thought in which theory retains its importance. He indicates that

we should find forms of theory that will be consistent with a localizing—or better—participatory, community-oriented politics. As a starting point: most people don’t live in carceral institutions and are only episodically subject to distinct discursive formations. They are instead, located in a certain place. Place is geography and vocations... This means that subjectivity and historicity are connected. Our place in the double sense of geography and vocations is known only by its history, so, therefore, is our identity.³⁶

He makes the crucial points that individuals are defined not only by subjectivity, but by their particular positions in history, and they do not experience their lives as defined by discourse. As for power, they do feel the effects of unequal power relations, but also feel empowered and motivated to struggle against these forces, especially through political means. Wolin defends the theoretical approaches of Plato, Hegel and Marx, all of whom Foucault considered totalizing theorists and criticized. Wolin believes these theorists present a self-reflexive form of philosophy which can overcome the weaknesses of excessive or Eurocentric forms of theory. Although he doesn’t spell out the parameters of a theory that can be both general and local, he believes that the dialectical nature of some of Western philosophy offers a good starting point of reconciliation between postmodern critiques of modernity and traditional forms of totalizing philosophy. While Wolin brings postmodern debates about discourse to the level of the

36. Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy*, 298.

historical and geographical locations of individuals, McNally further narrows down the focus of critiques of poststructuralism to the level of the body.

By correlating poststructuralism's prioritization of discourse over bodies with capitalism's alienation of the body, McNally makes a unique contribution to critiques of poststructuralism and its influence today. He argues that

postmodernist theory, whether it calls itself post-structuralism, deconstruction or post-Marxism, is constituted by a radical attempt to banish the real human body — the sensate, biocultural, laboring body - from the sphere of language and social life. As a result, I argue, these outlooks reproduce a central feature of commodified society: the abstraction of social products and practices from the laboring bodies that generate them.³⁷

According to McNally, social theory and language needs to be rooted in the material needs of individuals instead of abstractions such as discursive formations. The influence of poststructuralist thought, while aiming to undermine any totalizing system, can inadvertently serve to support capitalism's disdain for and control of the body for the maximization of profit.

As discussed in the second chapter, any abstract theory that professes to represent marginalized interests must be examined for misrepresentation or elitism. McNally analyzes the postmodern view of the body as "dematerialized, relieved of matter, biology, the stuff of organs, blood, nerves and sinews.... Liberated from biology, anatomy, physiology, social class, gender, and ethno-racial identity, the postmodern body is free to invent itself.... It is... 'no body at all.'"³⁸ Keeping the needs of the body, whether physical, intellectual, or psychological, in mind can allow for a more robust theory that will not fall into unnecessary abstractions, and

37. David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1.

38. McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 2.

perhaps allow for a reconciliation of some of the excesses of modern and postmodern thought. The deep influence of postmodern thought today can mitigate against anti-capitalist mobilization, in which class struggle becomes a common point of struggle and the body features prominently in analyses of class exploitation. McNally shows that this “new idealism” prioritizes the mind over the body, and then “patrols its linguistic space” so that the body cannot claim theoretical significance,³⁹ much as bourgeois thought separates manual from intellectual labour to legitimize class divisions.⁴⁰ He sees this as a project that is deemed to fail since the body will continue to claim primacy in intellectual endeavours. He insists that:

Inevitably, the postmodernist totalization of language collapses under the weight of its impossible project: to make everything language and, thereby, to make language everything. After all, to banish the body, to repress it, as the new idealism does, is not to eliminate it, but merely to forget it.⁴¹

His analysis that postmodernism totalizes language is ironic considering that the purpose of postmodern thought is to oppose all totalizing structures; it also recalls Wolin’s critique of Foucault inadvertently imposing a new kind of totality through his vague and diffused notion of power. While reiterating the crucial role of the body in theory, McNally is careful to note that not all bodies are created equal in a colonial, capitalist and racialized world, and the “ideal” body is still considered white, male and “maniacally, autonomous.” This ideal is closely related to the hyper-rational, autonomous and rational model of homo economicus that is created by capitalist society. He also emphasizes that his intent is not to reinscribe another totalizing structure with the body as a new kind of idealism. He states:

39. McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 7.

40. McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 5.

41. McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 3.

The body is not our point of termination. I am not serving up a simple inversion of the language/body opposition by valorizing the body over and against language. Rather, I hope to destabilize this dualism by showing how the body passes over into language and language into the body.⁴²

The purpose of repositioning the primacy of the body is to acknowledge the way that *both* language and body are pertinent sources of producing knowledge – neither can be neglected entirely. As with Antonio and Wolin, McNally, too, cautions us against rigid critiques of postmodernism that do not acknowledge its valid and necessary reproaches to some traditional forms of theory. All three theorists challenge us to reconceptualize what are often portrayed as incommensurable intellectual positions, and to push for more nuanced ways to reconcile universal and particular theoretical perspectives.

Feminist Poststructuralism

After a broader exploration of postmodern thought, its underlying features, some of its critiques, and some areas of exploration for more nuanced versions of postmodern thought, I now turn to the nexus between feminist and poststructuralist theory, since this is the specific literature within which we find theoretical analyses of religious women's agency. Nicholson examines the emergence of poststructuralism, especially as it is intertwined with some of the universalizing trajectories of modern thought. She examines the tendency of Enlightenment thought and its subsequent modern Western scholarship to posit "general, all-encompassing principles which can lay bare the basic features of natural and social reality."⁴³ Nicholson traces this back to the prevalence of pre-modern religious traditions in which "the purpose of

42. McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 11.

43. Linda J. Nicholson, "Introduction" in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

scholarship was to make evident the word of God as revealed in his creations.”⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that with the process of secularization outlined in the first chapter, the dependence on God’s infinite wisdom was replaced with an almost holy reverence for human nature and man’s natural abilities to produce transcendental meaning. This drive to find general truths to replace God’s authority paved the way for modern theory’s tendency to replicate a “God’s eye view” instead of a focus on different, contextualized perspectives. Although Nicholson acknowledges a few scholarly traditions that countered this trend, she believes that “an ideal of scholarship as transcending the perspective of any one human being or group has persisted as at least one highly powerful ideal.”⁴⁵ This undercurrent of universalism in modern thought is important to understand what came after it – specifically, postmodernism’s critique of elitist modes of thought. But postmodernists have not been the only critics of overreaching kinds of universalism in modern thought – political movements promoting the rights of specific groups such as Marxists, feminists, blacks and gays have been critical of the academic focus on objectivity and theoretical critiques of “value-laden” accounts of objectivity have been raised.⁴⁶

While the influence of Enlightenment thought and modern theory impacts a myriad of different academic domains, the field of philosophy is particularly imbricated in the practice of universalizing. Philosophy relies on abstract forms of reasoning grounded in logic, and it articulates general principles of knowledge, so it is well-situated to represent general

44. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 2.

45. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 2.

46. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 3.

arguments about normative ideals. This is why postmodern critique has focused on the propensity of philosophy to dominate and exert control. Nicholson asserts:

The postmodern critique has come to focus on philosophy and the very idea of a possible theory of knowledge, justice, or beauty. The claim is that the pursuit itself of such theories rests upon the modernist conception of a transcendent reason, a reason able to separate itself from the body and from historical time and place. Postmodernists describe modern ideals of science, justice, and art, as merely modern ideals carrying with them specific political agendas and ultimately unable to legitimize themselves as universals. Thus, postmodernists urge us to recognize the highest ideals of modernity in the West as immanent to a specific historical time and geographical region and also associated with certain political baggage. Such baggage includes notions of the supremacy of the West, of the legitimacy of science to tell us how to use and view our bodies, and of the distinction between art and mass culture.⁴⁷

I have quoted at length from this passage because it succinctly expresses the relationship between philosophy and postmodernism as a reaction to its overarching characteristics. It also articulates well the specific critiques that postmodern thought mounts of universal theories and, specifically, their reliance on problematic Enlightenment forms of reason. Hence, postmodern thought plays an invaluable role in bringing to the fore racist, sexist, and elitist undertones of the modern theoretical tradition. There emerged different variations of postmodernist or poststructuralist thought, as some of the previous thinkers have also mentioned. While “weak program” postmodernism is self-reflexive and critical, “strong program” postmodernism has a broader agenda of undermining any basis for normativity.

Nicholson expands on this:

The more radical move in the postmodern turn was to claim that the very criteria demarcating the true and the false, as well as such related distinctions as science and myth or fact and superstition, were internal to the traditions of modernity and could not be legitimized outside of those traditions. Moreover, it was argued that the very development and use of such criteria, as well as their extension to ever wider domains,

47. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 4.

had to be described as representing the growth and development of specific “regimes of power.”⁴⁸

This postmodern aversion to generalized forms of theory has come to be critiqued by some of the theorists mentioned earlier, such as Antonio, Wolin and McNally. I will argue that it is this form of postmodernism that is dominant in Mahmood’s work on pious agency, since universal notions such as freedom are considered a part of the “entelechy of liberatory politics” that can impose on particular lifeworlds.⁴⁹ As I hope this discussion will show, versions of postmodern theory that present a radical form of particularity with no normative content must be reconciled with reflexive forms of universalism if we are to broaden notions of religious agency and make it more reflective of the complexity of Muslim women’s lives.

After a brief exploration of some characteristics of postmodern thought, Nicholson touches on the connection of postmodern and feminist thought – is it a mutually beneficial relationship or do their theoretical foci differ and fundamentally work against each other? While it appears that postmodern thought and feminist thought have many common themes, such as their critiques of privileged perspectives that have the power to impose others, there is considerable debate about the compatibility of these two theories. As Nicholson states, there are many points of convergence between feminist and postmodern theoretical approaches:

Feminists, too, have uncovered the political power of the academy and of knowledge claims. In general, they have argued against the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the academy, asserting that claims put forth as universally applicable have invariably been valid only for men of a particular culture, class, and race. They have further alleged

48. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 4.

49. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14.

that even the ideals which have given backing to these claims, such as “objectivity” and “reason,” have reflected the values of masculinity at a particular point in history.⁵⁰

Feminists have long pushed back against claims of universality which seek to stifle the needs and voices of half the population. A glance through the canon of modern political theory is enough to show that women were excluded both formally as theorists and through the requirements for “objective” and “rational” philosophy. It seems postmodern theory provides the tools with which feminists can push back against some of the hubris of modern theory. Nancy Fraser and Nicholson point out that both theories work from opposite directions – while postmodern theory advances a philosophical critique of universalism and then uses it to analyze specific workings of power, feminist theory starts from a political commitment and then works towards broader theorizations and strategies. They believe that these different methodological approaches can be utilized in a complementary way and that both intellectual projects can mitigate the other’s weaknesses. For example:

Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend at times to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism.⁵¹

They offer examples of thinkers from both theoretical camps whose works are limited in scope due to these weaknesses, such as Lyotard and Shulamith Firestone. They are optimistic that certain characteristics of each perspective can work towards a coherent theory that is fruitful. Some criteria they establish for a unified postmodern feminist theory are that it must not

50. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 5.

51. Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 20.

eschew “large historical narratives nor analyses of macrostructures”⁵² and it must “be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods.”⁵³ These criteria make adjustments to extreme versions of both postmodernism that avoids normativity, and feminism that can often use “ahistorical, functionalist categories like reproduction and mothering.”⁵⁴ Moreover, postmodern feminist theory would need to be comparative instead of universalist, and would need to dismiss ideas of a subject in history, even if it is “woman.” The latter category would need to be more fluid to reflect the myriad ways that identity is constructed, keeping in mind other formations of identity such as class, sexual orientation and ethnicity.⁵⁵ For Nicholson and Fraser, a complementary and unified postmodern feminist theory would be

pragmatic and fallibilistic. It would tailor its methods and categories to the specific task at hand, using multiple categories when appropriate and forswearing the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology. In short, this theory would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single color.⁵⁶

Understood this way, the unified theory would be less a “theory” and more an ad hoc theoretical tool to be used for specific problems, able to adapt and utilize different traditions within both postmodernism and feminism. Fraser and Nicholson are optimistic that this imbrication can serve to be an invaluable tool for feminist political projects that need to rely on broad and varied alliances and that need to have multiple theoretical approaches to counter different social and political problems. While Nicholson and Fraser are hopeful about the

52. Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism,” 34.

53. Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism,” 34.

54. Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism,” 34.

55. Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism,” 34.

56. Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism,” 35.

possibilities for a happy marriage between postmodernism and feminism, it may be argued that the compromise waters down the separate complexities of the theories to a practical analytic tool that can be applied to specific situations.

Jane Flax is another theorist who sees potential in merging postmodern and feminist thought. In fact, she believes feminist theory should necessarily situate itself within postmodern thought since it cannot align itself with Enlightenment thought. She does acknowledge that it is tempting for those who have traditionally been excluded as irrational and dependent to want to assert themselves in the very ways that they have been denied recognition, but this can be problematic if the goal of feminist theory becomes a simple inversion. Moreover, it is impossible to deny that we live in a male world where traditionally “male” characteristics such as aggressiveness, competition and independence are valued. Flax is sympathetic to feminists who desire to replicate these values to integrate into society but cautions that feminism should incorporate the postmodern wariness towards impositions of generalized value systems. Flax pushes for a philosophical re-evaluation of values that are integral to feminism:

There should also be a transvaluation of values— a rethinking of our ideas about what is humanly excellent, worthy of praise, or moral. In such a transvaluation, we need to be careful not to assert merely the superiority of the opposite.... Our upbringing as women in this culture often encourages us to deny the many subtle forms of aggression that intimate relations with others can evoke and entail. For example, much of the discussion of mothering and the distinctively female tends to avoid discussing women’s anger and aggression— how we internalize them and express them, for example, in relation to children or our own internal selves. Perhaps women are not any less aggressive than men; we may just express our aggression in different, culturally sanctioned (and partially disguised or denied) ways.⁵⁷

57. Jane Flax, “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed.

Flax is correct to highlight the socially conditioned nature of gendered attributes such as manly aggression and womanly nurture. Even women who analyze women's sexuality under men may be guilty of generalizing since women's sexuality is not solely determined by male desire and a focus on male-female sexual relations rules out a whole variety of sensual activities women experience.⁵⁸ Moreover, men are implicated in and harmed by relations of domination that are dictated by societal expectations. Any resort to stereotypes or essentialized natures pertaining to biology need to be opened for examination. Indeed, these few examples are just a few of the pitfalls in feminist theorizing that lead to division or distortion. For Flax, feminists would do well to take to heart postmodernism's cautions about internal hierarchies and power dynamics, as well as its commitment to philosophical rigour in examining signs and discourse. Without conscious, critical and self-reflexive analysis, feminist theory risks becoming irrelevant or obtuse. After a detailed overview of different feminist conceptual and methodological errors, Flax encourages feminists to embrace postmodernism:

Our lives and alliances belong with those who seek to further decenter the world—although we should reserve the right to be suspicious of their motives and visions as well. Feminist theories, like other forms of postmodernism, should encourage us to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity as well as to expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these needs may be.⁵⁹

According to Flax, only a postmodern feminism will give us the tools with which to combat the multifold challenges facing women today. Donna Haraway and Andreas Huyssen also believe in the political potential offered by postmodern thought, which they situate within our particular

Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 55.

58. Flax, "Postmodernism," 53.

59. Flax, "Postmodernism," 56.

historical moment. Both see postmodernism as a crucial in avoiding the oppressive legacy of modern thought and navigating the political and cultural climate of our times.⁶⁰

A confusion that often arises in debates about the compatibility of postmodernism and feminism are inaccurate representations of either theory. Butler points out that postmodern theory is often grossly misunderstood in common discussions. She states:

I propose that the question of postmodernism be read not merely as the question that postmodernism poses for feminism, but as the question, what is postmodernism? What kind of existence does it have?... Do all [postmodern] theories have the same structure (a comforting notion to the critic who would dispense with them all at once)? Is the effort to colonize and domesticate these theories under the sign of the same, to group them synthetically and masterfully under a single rubric, a simple refusal to grant the specificity of these positions, an excuse not to read, and not to read closely?⁶¹

She offers different strands within postmodern thought of thinkers who oppose each other; for example, there are major differences between the thought of Foucault and Derrida, and Cixous and Irigaray are fundamentally at odds with each other. All these variations are often swept under the rug in efforts to critique postmodernism, or to dilute it to fall under the broad parameters of feminism. There is truth in Butler's critique – the philosophically dense nature of postmodern thought often makes it difficult for scholars to embark on a full debate around postmodern characteristics in all their variation. This project itself can be said to generalize certain aspects of postmodern thought in order to highlight the validity of universalism, and to conflate “postmodernism” and “poststructuralism” for the purpose of simplicity. While

60. Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989).

61. Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 37.

postmodernism can be misrepresented and essentialized in critiques, Fraser and Nicholson point out that “feminist theory” is not a coherent set of ideals either. Often, the same tendency to universalize that both postmodernists and feminists criticize is repeated within feminist theory. A more detailed review of hierarchies within/without feminism has been considered in the previous chapter, but here I will focus on Nicholson and Fraser’s enunciations of the ways and reasons that some kinds of feminist theory have displayed a tendency to generalize that would not be compatible with postmodern thought. Although its political commitment has helped feminism avoid some of the overly philosophical tendencies of postmodern thought, this commitment has also caused it to fall back on generalizations when theorizing. While feminists put forward social theories that are historicized, unlike the grand metanarratives of modern philosophy, they still retain a universalizing impulse that can replicate modern works that overlook difference. In explicating causes of sexism that transcend cultures, feminists assert what they claim are “empirical” theories of “history, society, culture, and psychology.” Yet Nicholson and Fraser argue that these theories

tacitly presuppose some commonly held but unwarranted and essentialist assumptions about the nature of human beings and the conditions for social life. In addition, they assume methods and concepts which are uninflected by temporality or historicity and which therefore function de facto as permanent, neutral matrices for inquiry. Such theories then, share some of the essentialist and ahistorical features of metanarratives: They are insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity, and they falsely universalize features of the theorist’s own era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and ethnic, or racial group.⁶²

Moreover, they give historical examples of political exigencies that pushed feminist theorists to articulate biological sources of women’s exclusion. For example, women in the New Left

62. Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism,” 27.

encountered opposition from men who used Marxist theory to minimize the concerns of the women by prioritizing class over gender. Thinkers such as Firestone combatted this hostility by utilizing biological differences to demonstrate that gender inequality predates class inequality and may even be the source of economic exploitation. Through this theoretical maneuver, she was able to challenge Marxists who considered gender oppression secondary to class issues, and to use biologism to criticize male domination, not to justify it.⁶³ But even so, Fraser and Nicholson view these kinds of moves towards strategic essentialism problematic and incompatible with the postmodernist aversion towards grand narratives and monocausal explanations of social phenomena.⁶⁴ After discussing a positive intertwining of postmodern feminist theory, I have touched on some moves towards essentialism that can prevent a productive union between the two intellectual strands, namely the tendency to generalize postmodernism and the feminist drift towards biological explanations. The latter trend gestures to a tension between particularity and universalism within feminist theory; this can prevent a robust feminist alliance with postmodernism unless we cherry-pick which aspects of both theories to utilize together.

After exploring some possible mutually beneficial convergences of postmodernism and feminism, and some cautions about essentializations, I will now discuss some authors who believe that the two theories are incompatible or detrimental to each other. The ultimate goal of this project will be to articulate universals for Muslim women's agency in order to build on pious forms of religious agency that use a poststructuralist perspective based in difference, or

63. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 3-4.

64. Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism," 27-8.

particularity. For this, I will take the stance that there are some forms of postmodernism/poststructuralism that can inhibit universal forms of feminist agency. There are a host of authors who also take the view that postmodernism and feminism should not join forces in theoretical and political projects. A strong proponent of this view is Seyla Benhabib, who states: "A certain version of postmodernism is not only incompatible with but would undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women."⁶⁵ Benhabib specifically examines the emergence of feminism and poststructuralism as two strong critics of Enlightenment modes of universalism. While the two are usually deemed complementary, Benhabib explains the divergence between certain forms of "thick" poststructuralist positions and any kind of broader emancipatory feminist agenda. Her political commitment pushes her to interrogate the two theories not only as abstract ideas but as normative categories that structure possibilities for change. She says, "[a]s categories of the present, they project modes of thinking about the future and evaluating the past."⁶⁶ Using the categorizations of the "Death of Man," the "Death of History," and the "Death of Metaphysics," which she borrows from Flax,⁶⁷ Benhabib explains certain assumptions of poststructuralist thought which, although they strengthen some feminist approaches, undermine other claims to utopian thinking. By the "Death of Man," she expounds on the postmodern tendency to deny a pre-formed Subject in favour of being formed in and through processes of discourse. Benhabib positions a feminist counterpoint to this position which she

65. Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 29.

66. Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism," 18.

67. Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32.

calls the “Demystification of the Male Subject of Reason.”⁶⁸ Instead of eliminating the very notion of a subject, she asserts that feminism prioritizes gender as the crucial and constitutive factor in the formation and subjectivity of the self. Hence while feminists should accept some aspects of the postmodern skepticism towards the subject, they should retain subjectivity and agency as a goal for feminist emancipation. The second criteria Benhabib borrows from Flax is the postmodern tenet of the “Death of History,” in which any teleological notion of Progress must be dismissed because it necessarily leads to totalizing theories for the privileged. Benhabib poses the feminist counterpoint called the “Engendering of Historical Narrative,” in which all historical narratives must be analyzed for the exclusion and marginalization of women. Countering excesses of “history” with “herstory” is essential in reclaiming gendered historical narratives. Lastly, Flax’s “Death of Metaphysics” entails the postmodern rejection of philosophy as “the privileged representative of the Real and interrogator of truth claims must play a ‘foundational’ role in all ‘positive knowledge.’”⁶⁹ Instead of unitary and homogenous abstract perspectives, this tenet of postmodernism prioritizes particularity, change and contingency. According to Benhabib, the feminist vantage point on this would be “Feminist Skepticism toward the Claims of Transcendent Reason.” She explains:

If the subject of reason is not a supra-historical and context-transcendent being, but the theoretical and practical creations and activities of this subject bear in every instance the marks of the context out of which they emerge, then the subject of philosophy is inevitably embroiled with knowledge-governing interests which mark and direct its activities.⁷⁰

68. Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 18.

69. Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 18.

70. Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 19.

For her, this “subject of reason” is mediated through gender relations and their impact in the psychological, social, economic, and political spheres. Through this dialogue between postmodernist and feminist foundational principles, Benhabib wants to show that the “elective affinity” between the two cannot be assumed and needs to be interrogated carefully, especially as feminist theory is currently undergoing an “identity crisis.”⁷¹ She cautions that “the postmodernist position(s) thought through to their conclusions may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women’s movements altogether.”⁷² Unlike the previous authors who saw more potential in the union of the two theories, Benhabib sees real dangers to their uncritical alliance. A particular conceptualization of poststructuralism would undermine claims to feminist agency, historical feminist struggles and the need for philosophy as a form of social criticism. For Benhabib, feminism needs a concept of agency, the use of grand narratives and philosophy in order to retain a utopian impulse that can provide the impetus for radical change. She concludes with a plea for a “regulative principle of hope” as key to feminist progress: “Postmodernism can teach us the theoretical and political traps of why utopias and foundational thinking can go wrong, but it should not lead to a retreat from utopia altogether.”⁷³ Benhabib’s commitment to political change pushes her to differentiate between postmodern possibilities for critique and its potential for radical, social projects for feminist emancipation.

While this project will generally agree with Benhabib’s position that poststructuralism cannot offer the theoretical tools necessary for discussions of universalism in religious agency,

71. Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 19-20.

72. Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 20.

73. Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 30.

it is important to assess the strengths and weaknesses of her overall argument so as not to replicate essentialisms or set up theoretical strawmen. In her review of Benhabib's essay, Fraser states that "Benhabib has unnecessarily polarized the debate by positing a set of false antitheses: antifoundationalism versus political engagement, situated criticism versus critical self-reflection, situated criticism versus radical opposition to one's society."⁷⁴ Fraser is correct to point out that Benhabib does present her feminist counterpoints to refute a certain strand of postmodern thought, perhaps similar to what Antonio called "strong program postmodernism." But she does not differentiate between different varieties of postmodernism/poststructuralism, bringing to mind Butler's criticism of uninformed attempts at theoretical mastery that can reify the very nexus of power and knowledge that postmodernism seeks to counter. This leads her to set up what she sees as the distinctions between both theories as starkly opposing views. Often, she does not take the time to explain divergent perspectives within each theoretical camp or expand on potential common ground between them. Nevertheless, I think her essay does provide important insights into some underlying normative and methodological divergences between postmodernism and feminism that can be useful in explaining universal forms of religious agency.

Other authors support Benhabib's view that postmodernism and feminism are better kept in separate theoretical spheres. In sharp distinction to previously mentioned authors who view feminism as belonging within the parameters of postmodernism, Christine De Stefano believes feminism should be situated within modern thought. She states:

74. Nancy Fraser, "False Antitheses," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 65.

Contemporary Western feminism is firmly, if ambivalently, located in the modernist ethos, which made possible the feminist identification and critique of gender. Although it was a long time in the making, Western feminism was finally able to deconstruct the presumably fixed and universal association between femininity and the biology of reproduction.⁷⁵

She cites feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Nancy Chodorow whose work was significant in uncovering constructions of gender apart from biological sex. She acknowledges this project has led to a rapid deconstruction of gender to create new kinds of identities rather than the fixed, homogenized understandings of gender, but believes the latter was enabled by modern theorists who demarcated gender from sex and pushed back against patriarchal understandings of women's biological roles. She questions whether postmodernism is a theoretical option only available to men, who have gone through their Enlightenment in which they claimed autonomy and defined the preconditions for that agency through rationality, property, and other such values. If women were excluded from that modern drive to uncover their autonomy and articulate universals, are they in a position to deconstruct a robust notion of self yet?⁷⁶ Moreover, Di Stefano is skeptical that a reactionary politics of postmodernism can provide the sense of shared identity to unite people and allow them to build meaningful solidarities. She asks provocative but necessary questions regarding the applicability of postmodern thought to political issues of today:

Can this solidarity be anything other than a local and negative solidarity, a solidarity of resistance rather than of substantive alternatives? If we are encouraged to embrace fractured identities, we are inevitably drawn to the forbidden question: Fractured with

75. Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity and Postmodernism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 64.

76. Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference," 75-6.

respect to what? Can fractured identities be embraced without the parallel construction of new fictions of counter-identity?⁷⁷

Di Stefano raises some important political questions about postmodernism and its capability to build social solidarities and political alliances based on its tenets of resistance and fractured identities. Moreover, she parochializes Enlightenment and modern theory and its neglect of women, posing the question of whether women could proceed to a critique of universalism if they never defined their own version of autonomy in the trajectory of the Enlightenment.

Sandra Harding is another feminist who observes some weaknesses within postmodern feminist theory. She critiques postmodern epistemology, instead offering alternatives of feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory. While she acknowledges that feminist postmodernism makes some valuable contributions to feminist thought and politics, she believes that it contains some Enlightenment assumptions which undermine some of its claims. For example, by critiquing a uniquely feminist science and epistemology, it affirms the Enlightenment bias that all science and epistemology must conform to “modern, androcentric, Western, bourgeois forms.”⁷⁸ Also, she is critical of postmodern thinkers who oppose feminist science because of a rigid attachment to a dichotomy between truth and falsity. Harding asserts that “feminist inquiry can aim to produce less partial and perverse representations without having to assert the absolute, complete, universal, or eternal adequacy of these representations.”⁷⁹ Although Harding’s discussion of science and epistemology deserves a detailed analysis, due to limitations of space I will here limit myself to her critique of

77. Di Stefano, “Dilemmas of Difference,” 76.

78. Sandra Harding, “Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 99.

79. Harding, “Feminism, Science,” 100.

postmodern tendencies to dismiss objectivity in favour of a more diffuse and decentred knowledge production. According to her, “Feminism needs decision-making procedures which both valorize the importance of the social context of inquiry and yet also avoid relativism.”⁸⁰ She is concerned that a form of anti-foundationalism that is found in postmodernism would disallow forms of epistemology that are useful for feminism.

Nancy Hartsock views postmodernism as a dangerous companion for feminism because it does not offer strategic alternatives to the problems of modern thought; instead, it only deconstructs and criticizes feminisms. She poses the incisive question of whether the purpose of theory should be only to undermine dominant views or to work through practical solutions that will empower the marginalized. She emphasizes:

Those of us who are not part of the ruling race, class, or gender, not a part of the minority which controls our world, need to know how it works. Why are we— in all our variousness— systematically excluded and marginalized? What systematic changes would be required to create a more just society? At worst, postmodernist theories can recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories which deny the right to participate in defining the terms of interaction. Thus, I contend, in broad terms, that postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt.⁸¹

More so than the aforementioned authors, Hartsock reprobates postmodernism for its supposed inability to give practical solutions for progressive goals. Interestingly, she situates the project of modernity as dependent on the creation of the marginalized “Other,” comparing the transcendent subject of the Enlightenment to the pathological dependence of the colonized on the colonizer.⁸² She posits that we need to stretch this dichotomy and make room for

80. Nicholson, “Introduction,” 7.

81. Nancy Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 159-60.

82. Hartsock, “Foucault on Power,” 162.

subjectivities which can be both particular and multiple, Subject and Object. She refers to this dichotomy of thought as a kind of imprisonment that prevents alternative subjectivities and political possibilities. Hartsock explains the dichotomy as follows: "Either one must adopt the perspective of the transcendental and disembodied voice of 'reason' or one must abandon the goal of accurate and systematic knowledge of the world. Other possibilities exist and must be (perhaps can only be) developed by hitherto marginalized voices."⁸³ This dissertation, as well, is an attempt to sketch the beginnings of another possibility for theoretical understandings of religious agency beyond postmodern views of difference and modern understandings of universality.

Susan Bordo agrees with Hartsock about feminisms' need for the category of gender if we are to engage in any kind of political and social movement to enhance women's positions. She is critical of postmodernism's relegation of gender to

a narrative ideal of ceaseless textual play. But this ideal, I will argue, while arising out of a critique of modernist epistemological pretensions to adequately represent reality, remains animated by its own fantasies of attaining an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence— a fantasy that I call a "dream of everywhere."⁸⁴

For Bordo, postmodernism's reactionary stance of eliminating the primacy of gender represents its own fantasy since women will continue to identify along the lines of gender and will need a robust framework within which to theorize this. She believes it is intellectually dishonest for postmodern feminism to negate this category since postmodernist thinkers stand on the

83. Hartsock, "Foucault on Power," 171.

84. Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 135-6.

shoulders of women who struggled to articulate the existence of gender oppression.⁸⁵

Moreover, Bordo questions whether the postmodern feminist push for deconstruction and repudiation of gender can be complicit in some structures of power, such as in “service of the reproduction of white, male knowledge/power”⁸⁶ or to further rigid codes of professionalism in which women must display “‘neutral’ standards of rigor and scholarship” that ensure a male model of reason and objectivity. Various male-dominated structures of power, such as academia, the workforce, and even capitalism, stand to gain by the diffusion of women’s social and political struggle. In the case of maintaining codes of professionalism at work, Bordo’s insights are acute and show how stereotypically male characteristics can be internalized for women for advancement in their careers. She is also critical about current trends in academia where it has become politically incorrect to speak of two genders for fear of essentializing. She pushes back against this “paralyzing anxiety” by asking:

Do we want to delegitimize a priori the exploration of experiential continuity and structural common ground among women? Journals and conferences are now becoming dominated by endless debates about method, reflections on how feminist scholarship should proceed, where it has gone astray, and so forth. We need to consider the degree to which this serves, not the empowerment of diverse cultural voices and styles, but the academic hegemony (particularly in philosophy and literary studies) of detached, metatheoretical discourse. If we wish to empower diverse voices, we would do better, I believe, to shift strategy from the methodological dictum that we forswear talk of “male” and “female” realities (which, as I will argue later, can still be edifying and useful), to the messier, more slippery, practical struggle to create institutions and communities that will not permit some groups of people to make determinations about reality for all.⁸⁷

85. Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism,” 141.

86. Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism,” 151.

87. Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism,” 142.

This lengthy quote succinctly describes some of the work that postmodern efforts to deconstruct can do. Her potent criticisms of elitist forms of academic grandstanding and abstract philosophy are particularly insightful because they are difficult to make. I have gestured towards this in previous chapter in the context of poststructuralist theories of religious agency such as that theorized by Mahmood, and the way this particular philosophical trend can become hegemonic within the academy. Bordo's challenge for academics to shift their focus from deconstruction and discourse analysis of gender to the practical struggles that are enabled or disabled by particular theories, is timely and urgent. Aside from academia, institutions are also still enmeshed in patriarchal assumptions so strong analyses and movements are needed to push for specific social reforms, such as in the areas of women and childcare, and these critiques rely on social categories around which people can rally and identify with. Bordo explains that by rejecting these kinds of social criticisms, institutions will not face pressure to change, and this will ultimately impact women negatively. As she states: "Most of our institutions have barely begun to absorb the message of modernist social criticism; surely, it is too soon to let them off the hook via postmodern heterogeneity and instability."⁸⁸ Along the same vein as Di Stefano, Bordo interrogates the benefits of postmodern skepticism towards theory and universalism to women since they have not sufficiently gained from the social, cultural, and institutional gains of the Enlightenment and modernism alongside men. Theories or general hypotheses can help articulate issues and allow for dialogue that will allow for a multiplicity of voices to partake in social and political debates. Bordo gives a detailed analysis of

88. Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism," 153.

theoretical and practical reasons that postmodernism can limit feminism, through the devaluation of social theory and the dangers of relativism.

Anna Yeatman is another theorist who is concerned about the influence of relativism, which can be “antifeminist in consequence if not by design.”⁸⁹ Significantly, she highlights that the postmodern theorization of agency should lead to the further analysis of that agency in socio-political terms. She emphasizes:

If postmodernism means we have to abandon universalistic, general theories and, instead, to explore the multi vocal worlds of different societies and cultures, this is not the same thing as abandoning the political-ethical project of working out the conditions for a universal pragmatics of individualized agency. The very orientation of postmodernism to the agentic quality and features of our sociocultural worlds underlines the significance of this political-ethical project.⁹⁰

To reconcile the postmodern push for particularity with theoretical and practical needs for general causes and normative ideals, Yeatman recommends that we utilize the postmodern spirit of philosophical criticism and push it in the direction of “political-ethical” projects that can help women overcome gendered obstacles in their lives. After a discussion of some authors who see strong points of convergence between postmodernism and feminism, I have discussed some dangers of essentialization for both theoretical positions and have rounded off the discussion with academics who are cynical about any natural affinity of both intellectual traditions. This overview of some perspectives on postmodern feminism sheds some light on the thorny nature of not only the debate on gender, but the relevance of postmodern feminism itself in solving contemporary problems for women. This project aims to avoid pitfalls of

89. Anna Yeatman, “A Feminist Theory of Social Differentiation,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 292.

90. Yeatman, “A Feminist Theory,” 291.

generalizing and essentializing, while agreeing with the latter host of authors that postmodern feminism alone does not give a salient framework for conceptualizing women's agency in its full complexity. While utilizing the "postmodern spirit," I seek to build on it to posit possibilities for universalism in dominant views of religious women's agency. I also agree with Bordo's concerns about academic complicity in popularizing postmodern trends and the difficulties women face in interrogating hegemonic modes of knowledge-production. It is significant that critiques of postmodernism discussed here align neatly with some of the critiques of pious religious agency discussed in the previous chapter; namely, the tendency of postmodern theory to miss capturing the everyday dilemmas, experiences and alliances of (religious) women. Hence expanding forms of agency for religious women necessarily involves situating this literature into the broader fabric of postmodernist/poststructuralist feminism since the same structural problems are interwoven through both sets of literature. The tension between particularity and universalism is an underlying theme in these works; the discussion of postmodern feminism sketches some possible ways to balance the push towards deconstruction and discourse in postmodernism with more universal goals of feminist theory and struggle, ultimately arguing that postmodern feminism alone is not conducive to feminist theory, unless it is a "weak program" or reflexive form. If the postmodern emphasis on difference is not sufficient for feminism, what are some theoretical supports we can use to better understand the tension between particularity and universalism? The rest of this chapter will sketch some insights by feminists that can give alternative theoretical frameworks to reconcile this apparent tension – in particular, I will discuss feminist epistemology, feminist critiques of universalisms, feminist

identity theory and Marxist feminist dialectics as better ways to conceptualize both women's unique subjectivities and their intelligibility in larger political and theoretical projects.

Expanding the Scope of Epistemology

In explicating the relationship between particularity and universalism, postmodernism presents the most explicit connection to the literature on pious agency. But I will broaden the discussion to discuss different interrelated theoretical paradigms that can help conceptualize a compromise between both levels of analysis. Using the work of Code,⁹¹ I discuss a comprehensive alternative to simplistic accounts of knowing that privilege men. Her proposal for a revised epistemology can accommodate the local and global, reason and emotion, and subject and object, as frameworks for understanding how we come to know; she also sketches internal biases within our structures of knowledge that can prevent robust feminist analysis.

Code builds on previous feminist critiques⁹² to pave the ground for a "Copernican" revolution based on gender. Building on and critiquing Kant's placing of man at the centre of the knowable universe, Code presents "ecological thinking," which privileges a feminist way of conceptualizing the world that is based on sensitivity to methodological, epistemic and contextual differences in knowledge production. Ecological thinking, for Code, encompasses a

91. Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

92. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988); Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is 'Strong Objectivity'?" *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992); Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on (Gendered) Locations* (Routledge, 1995); Lynn Nelson, "A Feminist Naturalized Philosophy of Science," *Synthese* 104, no. 3 (1995); Linda Martin Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of the Coherence Theory* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

variety of different interdisciplinary approaches, including feminism, a class perspective, postcolonialism and environmental issues. The strength of Code's approach lies in its decentring of the white masculine ideal of autonomy (or agency) for one that allows for subjective ways of knowing that can also be "centred" and valid. She is also critical of the legacies of liberal Enlightenment thought and its valorization of Western ideas of universalism, while not dismissing altogether "the explanatory potential of comparative, analogically interpretive analyses."⁹³ She explains that ecological thinking

is a revisioned mode of engagement with knowledge, subjectivity, politics, ethics, science, citizenship, and agency that pervades and reconfigures theory and practice. It does not reduce to a set of rules or methods; it may play out differently from location to location; but it is sufficiently coherent to be interpreted and enacted across widely diverse situations.⁹⁴

Code presents an alternative feminist epistemology that performs some of the work of both modern and postmodern theory in ensuring that theory is adequately sensitive to context while not being bound by a commitment to difference and deconstruction. It offers a middle ground to what is often portrayed as a theoretical binary between universalism and particularity, while centring the experiences of women. She notes that in liberal Western philosophy, the autonomous male ideal has figured prominently as the figure of rationality who can articulate normative ideals. She notes:

For epistemological purposes, he is and *should be* solitary, self-reliant, and rational, disconnected from accidents of embodiment, history, and place—both physical-geographical and social—and from the distractions of human relationships, affect, and personal, social, or cultural history.⁹⁵

93. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 8.

94. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 5.

95. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 208.

In effect, modern theory enabled and institutionalized a mode of philosophizing in which all vestiges of specificity, connection or emotion needed to be pushed aside for the purposes of a pure and general form of thought.

This has had an incapacitating impact on feminist theory and action; even today, women theorists face an uphill battle in attaining legitimacy for feminist critiques of “pure” and “objective” theory. Code explains that the epistemological requirement for objectivity prevents “subjective” aspects of theorizing such as negotiation and interpretation, methods which are paramount for many feminists.⁹⁶ To counter this tendency of modern thought, Code offers an engagement with particularity that can challenge male epistemological models and allow women the space to theorize with their entire selves, instead of feeling the need to bracket their own emotions and experiences. Code describes ecological thinking in normative language, as an “epistemology-morality” that can “push against the boundaries of the orthodoxy to demonstrate its own peculiar effectiveness in addressing issues on which epistemic and moral agents require guidance.”⁹⁷ It would enable more subjective ways of knowing and require responsibility for the way that that knowledge is produced and disseminated, through methodological pluralism and dialogue.⁹⁸ Code emphasizes that this new mode of feminist theorizing “redirects the focus of epistemic analyses toward situated knowledges, situated ethico-politics, where situation is constitutive of, not just the context for, the backdrop against which, enactments of subjectivity occur.”⁹⁹ Yet she reiterates that accounting for situated

96. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 208.

97. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 173.

98. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 19.

99. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 198-9.

knowledges need not eliminate that theory will remain hidden and convoluted in particularity and “the minutiae of the concrete, unable to escape the merely experiential.”¹⁰⁰ According to Code, ecological thinking is a feminist epistemology that gives women the tools to resist “hyperbolic autonomy ideals”¹⁰¹ while claiming the right to theorize and posit universal normative goals. Hence, Code’s innovative philosophical intervention offers a viable and desirable feminist alternative to dominant epistemological models that can exclude women.

While these traditional models of male-centered epistemology can be undesirable for women, Code points out that they can also be unattainable for them. Hierarchies of power can make it difficult for women to attain the autonomy that is a prerequisite for many Enlightenment-based philosophies. She explains: “Universal entitlement holds ideal autonomy at such a distance from everyday lives and practices that, for many feminists and other Others, it reduces to a hollow promise from a bygone era.”¹⁰² Indeed, women and other marginalized groups have yet to attain the social and intellectual positions, or views from nowhere, from which to articulate abstract and general principles along with their male counterparts. One need only recall that Kant, when declaring “Sapere aude” as a motto of the Enlightenment and modern theory, did not believe that women could attain this level of autonomy.¹⁰³ Code reiterates that it is those at the margins who are excluded from elitist forms of philosophizing

100.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 174.

101.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 198.

102.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 167.

103.Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

premised on male-saturated versions of autonomy, yet it is they who are best situated to use their experiences to supplement gaps in theory:

It is neither the self as onetime rights bearer nor the self as theoretically dispersed who pushes most urgently at the boundaries of received, objectivist knowledge, but the embodied, often injured subject, struggling to construct or reconstruct a livable way of being out of systemic oppression or out of trauma, grief, or despair.¹⁰⁴

Hence, the very experience of oppression can enable modes of theorizing that lead to liberatory ends, keeping in mind the nature of theory as grounded in praxis. For Code, ecological thinking necessarily leads to a commitment to social justice through epistemological rigour in both providing context to day-to-day struggles and a theory that dovetails with this commitment. Code describes this basic tenet of ecological thinking as requiring “principled adjudication of incompatible claims, effective deliberative practices for enacting them, and the vigilant monitoring on which most revisionary social movements depend to promote and preserve their fragile gains while countering threats of renewed oppressions.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, this revised epistemological lens requires “responsible imagining” of the needs of the Other and an epistemic humility that can prevent impositions of knowledge.¹⁰⁶ This is a far cry from abstract forms of theory predicated on individual autonomy of the privileged. Not only does Code highlight the discriminatory elements of traditional epistemology that excludes the experiences of women, but she also shows how this form of knowledge is complicit in power relations that can reify oppressions for disadvantaged groups.

104.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 210.

105.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 6.

106.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 206-7.

The strength of Code's ecological thinking lies in its ability to negotiate the impasse of particularity and universalism that besets the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. She accomplishes this with a commitment to ending social oppressions through decentring the autonomous male ideal from the modern philosophical imaginary in favour of a feminist epistemology that is sensitive to the experiences of women and marginalized groups but does not reduce them to an abstract plane of difference. Her epistemological engagement can help reconcile generalized theory with sensitive, contextualized analysis through her critique of objective ideals of autonomy, her balancing of different political theories and her hope for better ways of creating knowledge. As mentioned earlier, she is critical of modes of theorizing which preclude attention to emotions and experience. She explains:

Everyday vulnerability and experiences of trauma make owning one's capacities, emotions, and actions far less matter-of-course than liberal assumptions about the self-sufficient self-as-property assume; yet, phenomenologically, such experiences are as central as autonomy to human being. Hence again the need to engage with the intricacies of epistemic and moral subjectivity.¹⁰⁷

Here, Code integrates phenomenological experiences of trauma and oppression as integral to autonomy, understood as a self-directed decision-making related to moral independence. The imbrication of both autonomy and the impact of oppressive power that can be formative offers a possible alternative to exclusivist notions of agency and power found in modern and postmodern thought. The combination of different theoretical branches offers another way of reconciling this apparent contradiction. Code demonstrates that ecological thinking

107. Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 203.

encompasses a broad range of issues, such as “feminist, classist, environmental, postcolonial, racist [and] sexist” concerns.¹⁰⁸ She points out that while it has become part of popular culture to give verbal homage to women, minorities, the environment, and other politically correct causes, this can be disingenuous and usually does not lead to action, or change. Ecological thinking can introduce “creative possibilities of ecological thinking for interrupting and restructuring the dominant social and philosophical imaginary.”¹⁰⁹ While different philosophical approaches can often be positioned against each other, such as modernism vs. postmodernism and Marxism vs. postcolonialism, Code seeks to provide a general epistemological framework that is coherent and robust but also amenable to different theories. As she points out, “There need be no forced choice between them, for selves are multifaceted in their responses to situations and other selves.”¹¹⁰ Because we are fractured and complex beings, we require a multiplicity of theories to respond to different problems. Lastly, Code cautions against intellectual paralysis or hopelessness that can prevent efforts to reach across both theoretical and social divides. She is wary of epistemological or theoretical analysis that does not privilege praxis or push for social justice. Code states:

The epistemic stance I am adopting enjoins skepticism about the possibility of understanding across differences, though it amounts to a healthy skepticism, not to the despair engendered by radical incommensurability... But neither is radical incommensurability a tenable position, given how often “we” demonstrably succeed in practice—albeit variably, ambiguously, intermittently—in negotiating knowledgeably with one another, across diverse situations and circumstances.¹¹¹

108.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 4.

109.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 4.

110.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 204.

111.Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 233.

While some feminists have critiqued postmodernism for its inability to provide justification for resistance and change in social and political spheres, Code insists on both a “healthy skepticism” in knowledge construction but also an optimism that people from different backgrounds and experiences can come together to agree on ways to ameliorate the world. Radical relativism, apathy or indifference are not conducive to feminist theorizing, and this impetus towards hope and progress is included in Code’s ecological thinking. Hence, her epistemological intervention offers some ways to stretch beyond binary thinking regarding feminism and its complicated ties with postmodern thought.

Tempering Universalisms:

a) A Comparative Analysis

As I mentioned earlier, the tension between universalism and particularity is an ongoing intellectual debate between modern and postmodern thinkers. For feminism, this intellectual terrain can take on different forms, such as the relationship between universalism and relativism and the ramifications of gendering universalism as a symbol of male domination to be overcome. Khader is a theorist who proposes a transnational feminist ethic that can avoid both universalism and relativism, and Western imperialism, while still providing some normative basis for feminist struggle. Irigaray is a philosopher who counters the male symbol in Western philosophy, which has dominated not only metaphysics but ontology and epistemology. She pushes back against universalism interpreted as sameness and imposed upon women, through her ethics of sexual difference. Both intellectuals challenge some of the conceits of universalism and propose feminist solutions that can mitigate between universalism and particularity.

Khader presents a case for “decolonizing universalism” to work towards a conceptualization of feminism that can take into account the uneven impact of Western epistemological and cultural imperialism on women globally. From the perspective of postcolonial and decolonial thought, she theorizes a transnational feminist ethic which prioritizes opposition to sexist oppression alone without cultural assumptions of women’s autonomy and individualism. Considering non-ideal conditions of women under imperialism, she aims towards justice-enhancement instead of justice-achievement from a Western ideal of the liberated woman. Khader’s careful considerations of contextual differences in the conditions of possibility for feminist progress allows for meaningful inclusion of non-Western women in feminist discussions and dialogue. Her work can help articulate and analyze Muslim women’s subjectivities as they grapple with legacies of historical and ongoing imperialism by mediating between the pillars of universalism and relativism, which are often ascribed to modernism and postmodernism, respectively.

Since Khader presents a negative definition of feminism, as opposition to sexist oppression, it allows her to make room for contingency and different cultural expressions of women’s resistance against subjugation. For example, her negative definition allows for forms of tradition and religion and for partial movements towards feminist goals instead of a rigid requirement for complete autonomy (which may not be desirable for all women to begin with). To fully illustrate her engagement with forms of feminist universalism, it is fruitful to compare her flexible approach to a universalism with a more consolidated approach; namely, Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach. While Nussbaum’s comprehensive list of desirable goals for all women takes into consideration a broad range of situational factors that could impact

different women's abilities, she, too, falls into some Enlightenment tropes of universalism. As Khader explains, "Enlightenment liberalism is a view according to which moral progress occurs through the abandonment of traditional values and unchosen relationships, as well as through the universalization of economic independence."¹¹² While she acknowledges that Western feminists do not explicitly state these beliefs, she believes they are implicitly contained in discussions about Other, non-Western women, and Nussbaum's approach is not entirely free of these assumptions. While acknowledging the importance of Nussbaum's capabilities approach, I will use Khader to critique its normative implications and propose an alternative model of nonideal universalism and show its strengths over Nussbaum's model. Khader attempts to temper feminist universalism (more specifically, liberal feminism) with a nuanced model of normativity that can include a diverse array of women and yet avoid the pitfalls of relativism.

Nussbaum makes a strong case for normative values that can be applied to all women in all contexts. While giving a broad overview of the two camps that she labels "do-gooder colonialism" and "uncritical validation of the status quo"¹¹³ she firmly insists that "there are universal obligations to protect human functioning and its dignity, and that the dignity of women is equal to that of men."¹¹⁴ She proceeds to outline her "capabilities approach," a list of 10 basic functions which she sees as necessary for a full and flourishing life. The 10 capabilities are that of life, bodily health, bodily integrity, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, concern for other species, play and control over one's environment.¹¹⁵ She

112. Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

113. Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

114. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 30.

115. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 41-2.

emphasizes that these are “capabilities” and not requirements of “functioning”¹¹⁶ since people may choose not to exercise certain capabilities. The strength of her approach lies in her rigorous exposition of universal needs and capacities, while trying to take into account context and local needs. She does an excellent job of expanding liberal thought to include women and their agency. But ultimately, her vision of liberal internationalism does not offer women (mostly in the Third World) living under multiple forms of oppression sufficient theoretical tools with which to understand their material, political and ethical struggles.

Khader presents an alternative vision in her book. She argues that “an understanding of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression, coupled with an understanding of transnational feminist praxis as aiming at justice enhancement in a world characterized by historical and ongoing imperialism, can form the basis of an anti-imperialist and universalist feminism.”¹¹⁷ In so doing, she rejects “missionary feminism,”¹¹⁸ or liberal internationalism of the kind Nussbaum advocates for, which equates women’s progress with their adoption of specific values. To adequately explain Khader’s critiques of theories of feminist universalism, I will critique Nussbaum based on her lack of acknowledgement of global structures of inequality, her intellectual flattening out of opponents’ perspectives, and her espousal of Enlightenment values of freedom from tradition and benefits of capitalism.

While Nussbaum insists that we must have a solid basis of agreement on broad universal feminist values to best oppose women’s oppression, she seems to prioritize localized forms of harm over more structural ones. Nussbaum acknowledges that her empirical analysis

116. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 44.

117. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 3.

118. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 3.

is predicated on her experience in Western contexts, but she does not dwell on the fact that the capabilities may not be feasible for women in impoverished or authoritarian countries with limited choices. Moreover, she does not consider harms of imperialism and colonialism which can impact economic, material, and ideological realities, instead placing the responsibility of providing a basic threshold of life on state governments.¹¹⁹ As Khader explains, “So long as Westerners continue to believe that their values are the only ones that can promote feminist change, and so long as global conditions afford them disproportionate power, Westerners are likely to continue engaging in imperialism in the name of feminism.”¹²⁰ Therefore, Khader advocates for a model of “nonideal universalism,”¹²¹ which takes into account the vastly different qualities of life open to different women simply by the basis of whether or not they are born into conditions of political and economic stability. According to her, this solution can avoid impositions of an idealized Western culture, as well as encourage discussion around justice enhancement instead of achievement to allow for critique of imperialist interventions. Although Khader acknowledges that a focus on opposing sexist oppression seems to define feminist negatively, instead of having positive prescriptive goals like Nussbaum, she does not rule out genuine feminist solidarity if it is based on intercultural dialogue and empirical evidence, an accurate understanding of indices of advantage and disadvantage and a lack of imposition of Western “solutions” on non-Western women.¹²² Khader explains that to take an intersectional approach, women who are multiply oppressed may need to think of strategic

119. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 42-3.

120. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 17.

121. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 7.

122. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 11-2.

ways to counter both imperialist and gender oppression, and one cannot hold priority over the other. It appears that while Nussbaum presents a top-down approach to feminist universalism which posits normative values, while leaving room for individual choice, Khader seeks a bottom-up approach that keeps in mind non-ideal circumstances while working towards the common goal of opposing sexist oppression. As she says, “we do not need a thick, justice-monist ideal of the gender-just society to oppose gender injustice”¹²³ and feminism should involve equitable power relations that allow for the proper distribution of goods instead of a pre-commitment about which goods are required for a good life.

Secondly, political and philosophical imaginaries can prevent an accurate assessment of women’s concrete situations. The concept of universalism has rightly been criticized for its Eurocentric roots, especially in projects of Western cultural and political domination. Similarly, relativism has taken on negative connotations related to apathy or lack of intellectual rigour. Although Nussbaum strives to take a balanced approach, she also falls into this trap of caricaturizing the different perspectives in order to set up a binary that she can then easily critique. While discussing “anti-universalist conversations”¹²⁴ from “relativist social scientists,”¹²⁵ she proceeds to give extreme examples of said relativist positions, such as an American economist who opposes the negative impact of Western developmental projects in India because they encourage a split between public and private spheres. The economist defends this view by showing the excellence of local custom in which women are equally forbidden from public and private spaces when they are menstruating. Nussbaum gives another

123. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 3.

124. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 35.

125. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 36.

example of these “relativist” discussions, citing a French anthropologist who is opposed to the imposition of Western medicine in India because it takes away from the power of a goddess who was believed to avert smallpox. While Nussbaum gives these examples from her personal experience at a conference, they beg the question: are the positions that women should be equally discriminated against at work and home, and that preventable diseases should not utilize Western medicines and instead pray to a goddess, the best examples of non-universal or relativist positions? Moreover, why are all perspectives that are “anti-universalist” necessarily “relativist”? And why do the two examples of “relativist social scientists” consist of Western scholars at a conference speaking for other cultures? These kinds of essentialized positions build and reinforce intellectual strawmen and prevent more accurate representations and context-specific solutions. Khader agrees that universalism’s historical equation with Western values has led to all anti-imperialist struggles being defined as relativist. She says, “In my view, the universalism/relativism framing of debates about decolonial feminisms has blocked attention to the important normative claims that suffuse anti-imperialist feminist theories.”¹²⁶ She argues for a more holistic and ethical approach that can see shades of grey between the binary of universalism and relativism.

Lastly, Khader criticizes Nussbaum’s aversion to tradition as the main source of women’s oppression. As mentioned earlier, Nussbaum believes that equal choice for basic capabilities can guarantee the accoutrements for a good life, regardless of structural oppressions such as imperialism. Although she does pay lip service to traditions as being a possible source of

126. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 3.

women's flourishing, she repeatedly undermines this attempt by referring to traditions in disparaging ways, aligned with what seems to be an intrinsic connection to women's disempowerment. Due to power imbalances in favour of men, she implies that for the most part, traditions are cumbersome for women.¹²⁷ For example, when she mentions ancient traditions, she follows up by stating:

We would never tolerate a claim that women in our own society must embrace traditions that arose thousands of years ago; indeed, we are proud that we have no such traditions. Isn't it condescending, then, to treat Indian and Chinese women as bound by the past in ways that we are not?¹²⁸

I can only assume that the "we" in her quote refers to Western women as not being bound by traditions from many years ago. This is a naïve statement if we consider that the "Western tradition" has also had a particular historical trajectory and did not arise spontaneously; women, too, are products of this history, even if they were largely excluded from the masculinist intellectual sphere. Nussbaum's bias against tradition is evident as her only criteria for a repressive tradition seems to lie in its being based in historical customs. As Khader points out, "Enlightenment liberalism is a view according to which moral progress occurs through the abandonment of traditional values and unchosen relationships, as well as through the universalization of economic independence."¹²⁹ Indeed, Nussbaum lists the capability to own property under the capability of "control over one's environment" as a basic good for women, which is line with liberal economic theory. Many authors, such as Mahmood, critique the secular liberal assumption that feminist agency must involve an abandonment of tradition,

127. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 8.

128. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 37.

129. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 4.

usually associated with religion, culture and community. This bias can lead to the dismissal of all sources of tradition instead of a case-by-case assessment of different sources of oppression. As Khader argues, “feminism does not require value for what I call ‘Enlightenment freedom,’ the ability to reject or question traditional dictates *because they are traditional dictates*.”¹³⁰ The opposition to tradition is a long-standing bias in liberal thought and can lead to impositions by Western women who overlook the possible contribution of cultural and religious traditions to women’s well-being and happiness.

I have engaged in a dialogue between two different norms of feminist universalism; one posits a positive notion of feminism with ten defined capabilities for women based on economic and political liberal theory and the other theorizes a negative ideal of feminism with several broad themes (such as “nonideal universalism”) under which umbrella women from vastly different lifeworlds may be able to find normative feminist goals to aspire to. Khader presents a theoretical grounding for a more nuanced universalism that does not ascribe to “justice-monism” and builds a negative conception of women’s freedom which can be applicable to different social and cultural contexts. There are two caveats to this comparative analysis: Khader herself does not address Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, although she does explicitly counter liberal feminists such as Susan Moller Okin as representative of the “missionary feminism” view.¹³¹ Moreover, I have not given a detailed analysis of Khader’s transnational feminist ethic, instead opting to bring out salient thematic differences with mainstream positions of feminist universalism. This debate gives an example of theorization in

130. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 9 (original italics).

131. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 50.

the “grey area” between feminist universalism and relativism, a debate that mirrors the larger debate between modernist universalism and postmodernist anti-universalism/relativism that was gestured to earlier in the chapter. Khader’s efforts to decolonize feminist universalism can be compared to postmodern thinker’s opposition to modernist universalism, except that Khader does not see the need to eliminate normativity altogether. As such, she may be compared to “weak program postmodernism” which can reconcile some elements of both theories. She insists on keeping feminist ideals that can be applicable to *all* women, while being critical of a relativism that threatens to undermine any progressive political goals. Hence, her work is a good example of a cross-cutting, interdisciplinary philosophical methodology that can compromise between universalism and particularity.

b) Gendering Universality

Irigaray is a theorist who questions the gendered impact and implications of philosophical universalism if we interpret it as the male imposition of symbolic sameness on women. While postmodern thinkers challenge the universality of modern thought based on its glossing over of difference, Irigaray sees this universality as predicated on the denial of subjectivity to women. To counter the male symbol which has dominated the horizons of both philosophy and psychology, she advocates for a kind of strategic essentialism that can allow women to reclaim their own identities, through an emphasis on sexual difference. As she states, “Women cannot be liberated from a reality other than a sexual one because this is the starting point from which they are exploited.”¹³² According to her, the tradition of Western

132. Luce Irigaray, “Paris, Summer 1980,” in *Women Analyze Women in France, England and the United States*, ed. Elaine Hoffman Baruch and Lucienne J. Serrano (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 155.

(modernist) philosophy has been complicit not just in excluding women, but in instituting a hegemonic male “phallic economy” that has had metaphysical, ontological and epistemological consequences for women.¹³³ Moreover, this symbolic value system has seeped into our culture, impacting both political and economic possibilities for women. Irigaray elaborates on the “political stake” in this lack of possibility for women’s subjectivity to emerge:

The fact that women's "liberation" requires transforming the economic realm, and necessarily transforming culture and its operative agency, language. Without such an interpretation of a general grammar of culture, the feminine will never take place in history, except as a reservoir of matter and of speculation.¹³⁴

Her emphasis on feminine difference is thus meant to allow women to deconstruct the category of male sameness from within, by using its own categories and tools. Once women have been able to separate themselves from the overarching male symbol, they will be able to define the terms of their own liberation. Irigaray is a complex thinker – some feminists are uncomfortable with her essentialism, or strategy of mimesis, and her emphasis on resistance through the role of language places her firmly within the postmodernist camp. Furthermore, her binary approach to sex is reflective of her time and not inclusive of other sexual orientations. Yet she brings a uniquely feminist critique of modern philosophy in favour of creative possibilities for both sexes to be able to shape themselves free of structures of domination. Hers is a thought-provoking engagement between universality and difference that highlights the role of Western philosophy in depriving women of subjectivity. To be more

133. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York, Cornell University Press, 1985), 114.

134. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 155.

specific, she places emphasis on women's difference to push back against male hegemony, and to reach an eventual reconciliation between universality and particularity.

Philosophy is invested in preserving existing modes of privilege that resist challenges from difference.¹³⁵ Irigaray pushes the critique further and shows that from its origins in ancient Greece, the foundation of Western philosophy has been built on the denial of women's perspectives. She reiterates:

It is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and disrupt, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse. Thus we have had to go back to it in order to try to find out what accounts for the power of its systematicity, the force of its cohesion, the resourcefulness of its strategies, the general applicability of its law and its value. That is, its position of mastery, and of potential reappropriation of the various productions of history.¹³⁶

Philosophy holds mastery over other intellectual disciplines, and holds the power to influence culture, and language. Hence, the starting point for any feminist intervention must be an intervention into the trajectory of male-centred philosophy that has a "stranglehold on history."¹³⁷ According to Irigaray, much of this domination is enacted through its ability to reduce others to the "economy of the same," thus depriving them of their particularity through an elaborate system of appropriation, both symbolically and in their practical lives. She further adds that "the teleologically constructive project it takes on is always also a project of diversion, deflection, reduction of the other in the Same. And, in its greatest generality perhaps, from its power to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of

135. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism"; Code, *Ecological Thinking*.

136. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74.

137. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 149.

a 'masculine subject.'"¹³⁸ The "male phallic economy" imposes its own teleology on women by depriving them of subjectivity, or of "affirming its singular and universalizable link to one as self."¹³⁹ Here, we see Irigaray's psychoanalytic insights emerge; for her, there is an element of unconscious interpretation in the very act of doing philosophy, one that can enable repressions and structures of language, even in its silences.¹⁴⁰ In psychoanalytic terms,

the masculine will be able to retrace the path of his discursive law, but it is also the role of the masculine to prescribe the law for the female, since she can have no knowledge (of it) for herself. And the fact that, ideally, each is both unconscious and conscious does not in practice prevent the conscious from being identified as masculine, whereas the unconscious remains on the female side, repressed as a result of the impossibility of differentiating the maternal.¹⁴¹

The harm to the psyche of women caused by the imposition of sameness is to deny them access to the universality of their identity and sex. Women are not able to articulate their own subjectivity apart from female stereotypes, as held in place by masculine ideals. Philosophy thus provides the theoretical tools by which the male symbol maintains a "matrix of appropriation"¹⁴² over women. It is important to point out that Irigaray is not leveraging her critique against "men" but the "male symbol," or the discursive logic of Western philosophy that controls our collective cultural assumptions. Moreover, she is not advocating for a reversal of the hierarchy with women imposing their own linguistic and cultural control, as some radical feminists have been criticized for doing, but she is proposing a levelled playing field for both sexes by giving women the conceptual space to define their own identities.¹⁴³ This new

138. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 74.

139. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 224.

140. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 75.

141. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 224.

142. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 151.

143. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 32-3.

“economy” would allow a “two-pronged quasi-transcendental universal that sets forth the general conditions of possibility and impossibility without foreclosing on possible changes, mutations, and transmutations.”¹⁴⁴ Both sexes would be able to attain a different relation to the self, truth, and temporality.¹⁴⁵ According to Irigaray, this utopia would “open up the possibility of a different relation to the transcendental” that is “neither simply subjective nor simply objective, neither univocally centered nor decentered, neither unique nor plural.”¹⁴⁶ This vision of gendered liberation is a long way from the philosophical insistence on sameness; if Khader “decolonizes” universalism, then Irigaray “de-genders” it to eliminate patriarchy and allow individuals of both sexes to flourish under their own imaginaries.

The method that Irigaray utilizes to achieve the conditions of this utopia is mimesis. As mentioned earlier, Irigaray is sometimes accused of promoting gender essentialism by giving analytical weight to sexual difference and stereotypically gendered characteristics. Irigaray has responded by defending practices of mimesis, or resubmitting to stereotypes in order to play within the boundaries and show their contingent nature to change them. She explains:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself-inasmuch as she is on the side of "perceptible," of "matter"-to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function.¹⁴⁷

144.R. Crapo, *The Way of Love: Practicing an Irigarayan Ethic*, PhD dissertation (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 2016), 108.

145.Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 154.

146.Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 153.

147.Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 76.

She theorizes within categories that already exist and govern the structure of society, in order to disrupt those boundaries, promoting characteristics of “femininity” only to counter culturally hegemonic ideas of masculinity, and to reach an eventual state where both genders can play androgynous roles in society. In her work, she enacts this through play on common verbal and written expressions, such as when she writes “I love to you” instead of “I love you” to emphasize the reciprocal nature of love. These types of discursive interruptions can draw attention to masculine assumptions that are insidious in culture and slowly sketch an imaginary in which women are also philosophical and social “subjects” instead of only objects of history. Instead of desiring to be “equals” of men, women are capable of “jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.”¹⁴⁸ Through this act of theoretical sabotage, women can push back against representations of lack or deficiency through a “disruptive excess” in our theoretical and social imaginary. For Irigaray, linguistic acts of rebellion can also impact economic and political possibilities for women, since they are formed in and through cultural and social practices. She emphasizes the intrinsic connection between philosophical interventions of language and women’s material conditions:

Every operation on and in philosophical language, by virtue of the very nature that discourse — which is essentially political — possesses implications that, no matter how mediate they may be, are nonetheless politically determined. The first question to ask is therefore the following: how can women analyze their own exploitation, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine? Is a women's politics possible within that order? What transformation in the political process itself does it require?¹⁴⁹

148. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 78.

149. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 81.

It is evident that symbolic or discursive resistance is key to creating a rift within the exploitative political and economic structures of society. Along with other feminists who are critical of feminist reliance on Marxism as a means to end gender oppression,¹⁵⁰ Irigaray is keenly aware that since women do not comprise a “class,” their specific needs are often not articulated through a Marxist lens. Traditional theories do not adequately represent their complex, often contradictory political struggles; she seeks to create another subversive method to push for women’s issues to become part of our collective agenda. She foregrounds “the condition of underdevelopment arising from women’s submission by and to a culture that oppresses them, uses them, makes of them a medium of exchange, with very little profit to them.”¹⁵¹ Women have exchange value among men like other commodities in the market, and their price is determined by societal expectations about their potential and capabilities;¹⁵² these expectations are deeply patriarchal, demanding obedience to norms of masculine sameness. Irigaray is not naïve to contemporary challenges to asserting difference in the political landscape – such as smaller offerings of inclusion that leave the overall structure intact, and the subtle balance between demands for equal inclusion in civic life but also respect for different expressions of gendered identity.¹⁵³ While there is debate about Irigaray’s methods, she presents a cogent and incisive critique of male universalism across philosophy, psychology, and

150. Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a Progressive Union,” *Capital and Class* 3, no. 2 (1979); Meg Luxton, “Rethinking Social Reproduction Through the Multidimensional Woman” in *One-Dimensional Man 50 Years On: The Struggle Continues*, ed. Terry Maley (Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Claudia Von Werlhof, (2007) “No Critique of Capitalism without a Critique of Patriarchy! Why the Left is No Alternative,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 18, no. 1 (2007); Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*.

151. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 32.

152. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 31.

153. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 81-2.

socio-political life. Her theory is a nuanced and strategic feminist harmonization of both universalism and particularity.

Towards a Feminist Identity Theory

Irigaray mentions the political import of women resisting patriarchal structures that are embedded in philosophy. She also comments on contemporary political spheres in Western liberal countries in which there are a plurality of voices, expressed as difference. Often, these demands for recognition of diverse groups and voices are expressed as “identity politics.” Identity politics is representative of the fractured nature of postmodernist thought, exemplified in social and political life, and it refers to the tension between recognition for particular identities with more universal expressions of common experience. This contemporary debate gestures to the challenges of making intelligible women’s experiences in political life. Women’s lives are embodied, complex, with commitments to family, community, and social lives, to a larger degree than men. Should this serve to strengthen their commitment to the political or to take away from their political potential due to a critique of “post-identity”? Why should women have to choose between their personal and political commitments? More broadly, these questions broach the thorny issue of how to represent women’s political agency, especially when they are framed by fierce debates that polarize postmodernism identity politics against intellectual theorizations of class or gender. McNay and feminist interpretations of Adorno present perspectives on identity theory that give support to feminist demands for inclusion of their experiences in the political sphere through a reconciliation between their subjectivity and more “objective” expressions of politics. McNay contends that struggles in women’s lives should not be dismissed as mere identity issues but taken seriously as formative to their

political agency. Adorno's theory of non-identity showcases his ethical views on negative dialectics, or the inability of *any* representations of identity to encompass the entirety of a being without a remainder. Heberle is a feminist who utilizes Adorno's ethics to conceptualize a feminist identity politics that is sensitive to difference yet not determined by it. Howe situates women's political identities within larger economic and political structures. These thinkers encapsulate the tension between particularity and universalism in discussions of women's political identities.

McNay conveys the importance of mitigating critiques of "post-identity" with a sensitive appreciation for women's day-to-day experiences, instead of needing to bracket them to participate in political or theoretical discussions. She points out the tension for women in balancing their push for equal, universal rights with the paradox of demanding specific gender-specific rights that can risk creating a two-tiered and gendered political system in which women are inferior.¹⁵⁴ For McNay, reconfiguring notions of women's political agency is crucial to prevent this gap between the specificity of their gendered lives and its intelligibility in accounts of politics. A recent trend towards abstract politics since the 1990s – particularly, ideas of "post-identity" in which appeals for recognition based on individual and group suffering are deemed responsible for a diminished scope of ideal politics, has led to a simplistic, masculine notion of agency that women do not always relate to. Interestingly, McNay includes the shift towards poststructuralist forms of feminism in this trend towards excessive abstraction and universalization, although poststructuralism/postmodernism claims to counter the universal

154. Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 118-9.

impulses of modern thought. One of her overarching themes in the book is the idea of “social weightlessness,” which she defines as the “dangers of excessively abstract modes of thought with regard to an account of power.”¹⁵⁵ While she acknowledges that some forms of idealizing are necessary for political theorizing and can be reconstructive, other forms of ideal theory can be problematic in their “reliance on idealized abstractions that treat inequality, domination, and so forth, as anomalies or deviations from a hypothetical norm.”¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, they can reinforce a false universal world-view in which the perspective of the privileged group masquerades as ontological truth. While McNay is cognizant that it is impossible to predict all possible localized struggles in any general theory of agency, and an assumption of equal universal agency can be a useful starting point in creating democratic regimes, it is imperative to interrogate “enduring, entrenched and therefore relatively predictable obstacles to political mobilization” as an integral aspect of political theorizing. She sheds light on this apparent paradox by which equal agency is promoted at the expense of the vulnerable that it purports to help.¹⁵⁷ Her goal is to enlarge current understandings of politics for women to enable them to engage with the political sphere as social, embodied citizens. She expands:

A phenomenological interrogation of embodied agency – or lack of agency – should include, inter alia, an interpretative element: it must explore individuals’ own understanding of their situation in the world and hence their reasons for acting or not acting in the way that they do. Focusing on the embodied register of social experience in this way potentially highlights mundane types of social injustice and domination that have significance for the individual but are often overlooked by political theorists.¹⁵⁸

155. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 8.

156. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 10.

157. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 17.

158. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 20.

By allowing for an interpretive element to agency, McNay makes room for phenomenological experiences of discrimination and inequality that can shape women's lives in minute ways that are not perceived by an exclusive focus on theory. Often, these can be the driving factors that motivate marginalized groups towards pursuing political change, so these subjective perceptions need to be taken seriously if theory is to avoid social weightlessness.

Although her critique is against many "post-identity" thinkers, including Linda Zerilli and Brown, she analyzes in detail Foucault's theorization of power and its impact on recent trends towards abstract philosophy, so much of the critique can be levelled against poststructuralist thought as well. Interestingly, while it can be an easy correlation to equate poststructuralist sensitivity to power to identity concerns such as oppression, McNay shows that the theory's emphasis on subjugation can preclude a fuller understanding of feminist political agency. She observes that domination can, indeed, produce docile subjects, but the experience of domination is also deeply felt as a subjective experience of inequality based on gender, race, class or other social positions; focusing on the structure of power only considers "a generic analysis of the intra-subjective effects of disciplinary subjugation" that is not grounded in subjective suffering. She elucidates: "The phenomenon of power cannot therefore be dealt with from a purely external, discursive point of view; the subjective experience of exclusion, marginalization and domination is also crucial to understanding its operations."¹⁵⁹ She notes that an exclusively external understanding of power is too abstract to analyze power fully, and it is also unattainable for many women. If we are to understand agency as only a process of subjugation to power, it circumvents possibilities for resistance and strategies for action.

159. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 109.

Moreover, if we take seriously the “mundane types of social injustice and domination” mentioned earlier, then subordinated groups may not have the luxury of objectivity from which to engage in the intellectual self-critique required for ethical self-transformation. McNay asks, “How do disempowered individuals who do not necessarily have the privileged detachment to experience their lives as sufficiently contestable to accommodate ethical re-fashioning begin to move towards such a goal?”¹⁶⁰ She turns the poststructuralist critique of modern theory as being an elitist exercise in abstraction on its head by charging Foucauldian accounts of agency with neglecting individual experiences of suffering. Touching on poststructuralist dependence on discourse analysis, she also portrays it as enacting a similar error in not being able to include analysis that does not conform to the “logic of signification.” Citing Bourdieu, she elaborates that “the tendency to linguistic universalism, where the more entrenched and pathological effects of social asymmetries are neglected by being assimilated to relations of meaning.”¹⁶¹ According to McNay, both through its analysis of an overdetermining structure of power, and through the reliance on abstract discourse, poststructuralist thought is not able to showcase an embodied and relational view of political agency.

After expanding on the importance of subjective experience in analyses of power, and the omissions of poststructuralist thought in giving weight to these experiences, McNay discusses the implications of “post-identity” for possibilities of political agency for women. In her view, fluid and abstract gestures towards politics that poststructuralism can employ are not grounded in everyday events and thus conducive to practical social change. She emphasizes:

160. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 112.

161. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 18.

Indeterminacy – whether it be epistemological, social or temporal – is certainly a necessary condition for individuals to be able to effect political change; however, detached from the context of embodied social practice, it takes the form of a reified abstraction. Without phenomenological content, the idea of world-building creativity says little about the substantive contours of radical political agency other than a vague gesture towards unanticipated otherness.¹⁶²

For her, it is essential to reconcile abstract poststructuralist accounts of the political with “embodied social practice.” Although she acknowledges that calls for recognition based on difference can be complicit in the diffusion of social solidarity, she believes that when it is directed towards political avenues and given opportunity and support, identity politics “fosters an enlarged perspective that enhances their participation in wider egalitarian politics.”¹⁶³

Because suffering can alert us to inequalities, it can motivate women to push for change and give them a grounded perspective to avoid elitism or excessive abstraction. McNay reminds us that some versions of poststructuralist thought can serve to pose false universals through all-encompassing structures of power and a preference for discourse analysis. This trend towards “post-identity” can be challenged with McNay’s revised version of feminist political agency. Her nuanced and perceptive critique of intellectual currents that pitch identity politics against political agency pushes us beyond this apparent binary to articulate better feminist strategies.

She says:

The challenge for feminist theorists may lie then not so much in abandoning ideas of identity and subjectivity as a conceptual dead-end, but instead in reconfiguring them in materialist and relational terms in order to work towards an enlarged understanding of the conditions needed for effective political agency.¹⁶⁴

162. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 115.

163. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 115.

164. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 130.

McNay's proposal is an important challenge to masculine ways of political theorizing and has not been engaged with adequately. If political agency is recognized as "a set of embodied potentialities"¹⁶⁵ then it can help to find a middle ground between abstract universalism and an exclusive focus on identity and particularity.

Adorno is a complex philosopher whose "negative dialectics" can serve as an antithesis to simplistic constructions of knowledge in which subject and object can be known and defined. His approach is similar to Emmanuel Levinas in its ethical approach to philosophical methodology and its indebtedness to the Other. While McNay presents a straightforward analysis of women's identity theory, Adorno's approach is more difficult to parse through for an account of feminist identity theory that can navigate between universalism and particularity. His sympathies seem to lie with a negation of dialectical methodologies altogether, since they do not give adequate scope to the object of epistemology, which cannot be reduced to abstract categories. While Adorno's thought is an excellent antidote to the hubris of rigid forms of cultural and scientific epistemology, his epistemology fares less well as a tool to help with a balanced feminist theory based in praxis. However, some feminists have found inspiration in the application Adorno's theory of non-identity to push for an approach to identity in which they are not reduced to difference. A brief summary of Adorno's views on non-identity, or negative dialectics, will be followed by Heberle and Howie's feminist interpretation of his philosophy.

165. McNay, *Misguided Search*, 117.

Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics presents a strong critique of identity theory, understood as the epistemological practice of categorizing objects to reach universal truths. For Adorno, modern Western philosophy, including Marxism, has been mistaken in utilizing a dialectical approach in which the subject and object are subsumed into a totality. He explains:

The mistake in traditional thinking is that identity is taken for the goal... The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object. Under its critique, identity does not vanish but undergoes a qualitative change. Elements of affinity—of the object itself to the thought of it—come to live in identity.¹⁶⁶

Adorno outlines the violence performed upon the object when identity thinking deprives it of particularity – in essence, the object is transformed to fit under the categories of thought imposed by the subject. The basic thesis behind negative dialectics is that “objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder.”¹⁶⁷ A more ethical way to conceive of philosophy or epistemology would be to allow the object of study to appear in its multifaceted nature, especially when this pushes back against the hubris of the subject of knowledge and its traditional norms. This kind of dialectic would reiterate a “consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt of what I am thinking.”¹⁶⁸ Nonidentity performs the work of negative dialectics by challenging totalitarian thinking through an internal critique of its concepts and proposing another conceptual model.¹⁶⁹ Constellations are a method by which negative dialectics can be carried out as opposition to identity thinking. Instead of starting with concepts

166.Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), 149.

167.Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

168.Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

169.Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147.

which are then adapted to specific uses, constellational thinking examines an aspect of the object, allowing those observations to then shape the concepts themselves. Adorno explains, “As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers.”¹⁷⁰ This method can allow for multiplicity and spontaneity in thought, allowing the object to show its full characteristics. By deconstructing the validity of knowing any object, be it a thing or person, in its entirety, Adorno seeks to turn the tendency of modern thought which sublates the object on its head by allowing the particular to dictate the terms of its own theoretical engagement. His purpose is not to invert the hierarchy between subject and object but to eliminate it altogether. His mention of guilt underlines the moralistic undertones of his philosophy – influenced by the horrors of the Holocaust that he saw as a natural culmination of hegemonic modes of Western philosophy and reason, his work is replete with references to responsibility towards the Other and humility. Haunted by the ghosts of the past, his negative dialectics prioritizes ethical constructions of knowledge more than a vision of how to practically enact a philosophy that questions the very ability to adequately philosophize. Terry Eagleton comments on Adorno’s philosophy of guilt:

What tattered shreds of authenticity can be preserved after Auschwitz consist in staying stubbornly impaled on the horns of an impossible dilemma, conscious that the abandonment of utopia is just as treacherous as the hope of it, that negations of the actual are as indispensable as they are ineffectual, that art is at once precious and worthless. Adorno makes a virtue out of agonized vulnerability, as though that is all honesty can these days mean.¹⁷¹

170. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 163.

171. Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 60.

In inscribing and reinscribing mechanisms for responsibility within his philosophy, Adorno's philosophy can be seen as circular or cynical, but it is important to keep in mind that his purpose is not to circumvent practical projects but to ensure they do not replicate domination. It is this redeeming feature that can be useful to feminists when theorizing the concept of identity in political life.

Adorno's thought offers feminist theory some insights into a form of reconciliation between universalism and particularity, albeit one that does not offer a totalizing dialectic but a mediating and, at times, contradictory connection between both concepts. Ultimately, it is the fallibility of political theory and politics today that leads to the cautionary impulses in Adorno's negative dialectics. He explains that the current state of dialectics ensures that it "unfolds the difference between the particular and the universal, dictated by the universal."¹⁷² To prevent this domination of the particular by the universal, he details a process of reconciliation:

Reconciliation would release the nonidentical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualized coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconciliation would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason. Dialectics serves the end of reconciliation. It dismantles the coercive logical character of its own course.¹⁷³

Reconciliation serves as the logical end of a skewed dialectics and allows for the nonidentical, non-oppressive elements to emerge from the dialectic, releasing potential for multiplicity and ethical ways of knowing. Adorno underlines that purely conceptual thought is an exercise in intellectual gymnastics if it is not tethered to the particular – negative dialectics can help preserve the integrity of the particular object from overreaching forms of universalism.

172. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

173. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 6.

According to Adorno, “The negativity of the universal in turn welds cognition to the particular as that which is to be saved”¹⁷⁴ and this is the inner working of negative dialectics in which the object cannot be encapsulated by its idea. It is evident that Adorno is sympathetic to an epistemological view that favours the particular, or the object, since modern thought has dictated the predominance of the universal. This has resulted in criticism that his project is too closely tied to strong program postmodernism and not conducive to feminist praxis. Yet in his exposition of human consciousness, he presents a more co-constitutive relationship between individual subjectivity and larger structures of thought or representations of identity (in terms of identity politics, not a conceptual categorization as Adorno classifies it). This can give insights for feminist understandings of identity in relationship to politics, as McNay has done. Adorno details the need for theory and mental experience to interact with each other:

Theory does not contain answers to everything; it reacts to the world, which is faulty to the core. What would be free from the spell of the world is not under theory’s jurisdiction. Mobility is of the essence of consciousness; it is no accidental feature. It means a doubled mode of conduct: an inner one, the immanent process which is the properly dialectical one, and a free, unbound one like a stepping out of dialectics.¹⁷⁵

The dialectic between theory and experience is essential to critical and radical thought, but both “are linked by criticizing one another, not by compromising.”¹⁷⁶ Hence, at the level of subjectivity, one needs to draw on one’s own identity free of unbounded categories, but also strive to express it in general terms for it to be intelligible – this multidirectional process ensures a critical stance and not a passive one. Negative dialectics involves “reciprocal criticism

174. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 48.

175. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 31.

176. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 31.

of the universal and of the particular”¹⁷⁷ at the level of human experience as well. Individual consciousness carries the kernel of the universal and can comprehend it. Adorno clarifies: “Individual experience goes as far as the universal. Even in epistemological reflection, logical universality and the unity of the individual consciousness are mutually interdependent.”¹⁷⁸ Even though there is a lack of parity between the particular and the universal in epistemology because the world is “faulty to the core,” this inequality need not replicate itself at the level of experience, where there is potential for a more reciprocal, though critical, dynamic between the particular and the universal.

Although Adorno’s philosophy can seem mired in conceptual deadlock, he proposes negative dialectics as a source of political inspiration. When expounding on the dialectics of identity, he iterates that it is not meant to stay at the level of the intellect: “And not of thinking only. If mankind is to get rid of the coercion to which the form of identification really subjects it, it must attain identity with its concept at the same time.”¹⁷⁹ Playing on the two different meanings of identity, the former as an oppressive form of categorization of knowledge and the latter as a unification of consciousness with concept, he hints that once it is recognized, negative dialectics can be implemented as a means to break out of oppression. For example, he describes the “barter principle,” or the way that class exploitation is also built on a form of identity thinking because human labour is reduced to and equated to a “universal concept of

177. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.

178. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.

179. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.

abstract working hours.”¹⁸⁰ To surmount this form of identity thinking, he utilizes the latent potential of negative dialectics:

When we criticize the barter principle as the identifying principle of thought, we want to realize the ideal of free and just barter. To date, this ideal is only a pretext. Its realization alone would transcend barter. Once critical theory has shown it up for what it is—an exchange of things that are equal and yet unequal—our critique of the inequality within equality aims at equality too, for all our skepticism of the rancor involved in the bourgeois egalitarian ideal that tolerates no qualitative difference. If no man had part of his labor withheld from him any more, rational identity would be a fact, and society would have transcended the identifying mode of thinking.¹⁸¹

Adorno here showcases the political import of negative dialectics – it is useful not just as a conceptual tool but can have liberatory force when applied to political problems, to create a “rational” and just society. Although Adorno does not exemplify in detail the political implications of his theory, it is possible to extract from it sources for radical thought that can break out of conceptual and practical cycles of injustice. Eagleton agrees that there is potential for negative dialectics to propose practical solutions; for example, according to Adorno, the concept of freedom can’t possibly achieve the fullness it promises politically, but instead of leading to hopelessness this realization can help give rise to better conceptualizations and enactments of freedom.¹⁸² Eagleton explains that “the indissoluble must be brought into its own in concepts, not subsumed under an abstract idea in that generalized barter of the mind which mirrors the equalizing exchanges of the market place.”¹⁸³ He aptly compares negative dialectics to the falsely equalizing process of the marketplace, in which all objects are equalized according to their exchange value. It is possible to find in Adorno’s push for ethical knowledge

180. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.

181. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147.

182. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 43.

183. Eagleton, *Significance of Theory*, 44.

and accountability inspiration for radical thought and resistance. In his pithy style, Eagleton writes regarding negative dialectics: “It is this internal slippage or hiatus..., this impossibility of ever coinciding exactly with itself, which provides the very source of its critical power, in a world where objects lie petrified in their monotonously self-same being, doomed to the hell of being no more than themselves.”¹⁸⁴ Perhaps Adorno’s complex philosophy is especially applicable in our current neoliberal landscape where conformity and exchange value have become the measurements for success.

Heberle and Howie present some feminist interpretations of Adorno that can help explain women’s identity and politics today. Heberle points out similarities between Adorno’s project of rebutting instrumental forms of logic and reason that prioritize sameness and the feminist revolt against Enlightenment modes of male rationality and privilege. Adorno’s respect for the multifarious nature of the object sheds light on the impossibility of both of these projects that impose hegemonic forms of universal identity on others. Heberle explains:

Adorno shares with feminism a desire to theorize from the concrete rather than deduce facts from general principles. Like many feminists, he is sensitive to the issues of difference, of embeddedness in one’s historical context, and of the gradual erosion of the significance of the particular as abstract identitarian principles come to govern the most private, interior, subjective experiences.¹⁸⁵

Adorno’s insistence on the concept never fully encompassing the object resonates with the feminist slogan that the personal is political – identity theory imposes categorizations both at the level of the individual and society. The remainder that is sustained from the subject’s attempt to identify the object allows for the possibility of social critique, pushing back against

184. Eagleton, *Significance of Theory*, 49.

185. Renee Heberle, “Living with Negative Dialectics: Feminism and the Politics of Suffering,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Adorno*, ed. Renee Heberle (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 219.

the perspective of the privileged few, whether in theory or in feminist politics. For example, women are often defined by their sexuality through a process of politicization legislated by hegemonic cultural norms – Adorno’s critique of totality and identity logic challenges this simplistic categorization.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, his theory can help conceptualize women’s identities so that their differences are not elided, and they are able to be active political subjects. While McNay offers an embodied and materialist conception of feminist political agency, Adorno reinforces a vision of feminist politics that can reconcile both their subjective and objective aspirations. Heberle asserts:

Feminist theory remains critical because it is situationally grounded and contextual. We can take this imperative in a direction that does not lead us into the aporias of identity thinking through looking again at Adorno’s theory of experience and negative dialectics. He prefers that a respectful distance, not a separation, be sustained between the truth and politics.¹⁸⁷

Heberle correlates Adorno’s epistemological stance on identity theory with the tension between identity and politics in contemporary discussions of identity politics. She explains that experiences of suffering forms an integral condition of truth in the public sphere. If subjective experiences of women are not an essential component of politics, then it will lead to a diminished scope of the political that is not grounded in ameliorating conditions for marginalized groups. Yet it also needs to be kept in mind that suffering and trauma cannot be considered constitutive of truth since, according to Adorno, experience itself is subjective and fluid. Brown cautions us against the moralizing that can result from a narrative in which questions of identity become institutionalized and conservative, and its negative impact on

186. Heberle, “Living with Negative Dialectics,” 229.

187. Heberle, “Living with Negative Dialectics,” 230.

radical and progressive politics.¹⁸⁸ Adorno is not as worried about the political consequences of an emphasis on subjectivity but is hopeful that these experiences could be gauged “with an eye toward proliferating the possibilities of resistance that can be seen only simultaneously by keeping an eye on the horizon of freedom.”¹⁸⁹ According to Heberle, a “respectful distance” between identity and politics, inspired by Adorno’s negative dialectics, can allow for a more nuanced and sensitive model of women’s political agency. Howe complicates Adorno’s potential for feminism by contextualizing women’s current role in proliferating the capitalist economy. Since women’s roles and identities are enmeshed with the “logic of capital,”¹⁹⁰ Adorno’s critique of identity is also compatible with feminist analyses of gendered labour under neoliberalism. The market system also represents a totalizing system in which generalized flows of (Western) capital can impose conditions of sameness upon particular societies, regardless of their contexts. Howe finds Adorno’s insights relevant for feminist politics at the level of their economic identities as well. She elaborates:

Thought of the nonidentical is a thought against binary simplification, abstraction, equivalence, and instrumentality and by bringing into question not only objective contradictions but also the conditions for the contradictions, is a thought against the gendered processes of global capitalism.¹⁹¹

While Adorno himself did not theorize about neoliberalism and its gendered impact, Howe is a feminist who applies his negative dialectics to women’s identities under capitalism. Here, too, negative dialectics highlights the oppressive elements of a “masculinist sexual economy”¹⁹² that

188. Wendy Brown, “Moralism as antipolitics,” in *Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized cultural politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002)

189. Heberle, “Living with Negative Dialectics,” 230.

190. Gillian Howe, “The Economy of the Same: Identity, Equivalence and Exploitation,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Adorno*, ed. Renee Heberle (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 337.

191. Howe, “Economy of the Same,” 339.

192. Howe, “Economy of the Same,” 336.

extracts an abstract value of exchange from women's labour. Both Heberle and Howe derive inspiration from Adorno's philosophy for a revised understanding of women's political identities, one that is not hindered by polarized accounts of difference as an impediment to collective political efforts. Both McNay and Adorno present feminist theorizations of identity theory that can reconcile particular subjectivities and universal assertions of politics. While McNay's focus is on an embodied and relational understanding of political identity, feminist interpretations of Adorno use his theory of nonidentity to show the futility of intellectual, political and economic categorizations that impose male categories on women. Identity politics is rife with contention about the role of difference in universal explications of politics. In the larger intellectual landscape, postmodernism is often critiqued as encouraging negative forms of identity politics that fracture common identities for self-contained expressions of suffering. These thinkers defend identity and difference as crucial to resistance and political change, while acknowledging the importance of political solidarity along universal values. They can give valuable insights about nuancing dichotomous perspectives of modernism and postmodernism in which women stand to lose by being made to choose between their particular experiences and inclusion in larger generalized political discourses.

Marxist Feminist Dialectics

After a discussion of negative dialectics, I will embark on an analysis of Marxist feminist dialectics as another theoretical tool to conceptualize valuable insights about harmonizing particularity and universalism. While classical Marxism has not articulated a clear feminist methodology, preferring to work with scientific principles of class, Marxist feminists have expanded on this to envision a dialectics that can include their subjectivity within a larger social

and capitalist framework. Marx and Engels' historical materialism is important in establishing a view of history in which ideas are mediated and determined by material conditions. Rebutting Hegelian dialectics which privileged ideology over material conditions, a Marxist theory states:

The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view, the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in men's better insights into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange.¹⁹³

This revolutionary assertion asserts the primacy of the social and material lives of people as opposed to abstract theories. Moreover, Marx and Friedrich Engels locate the root source of social inequality in changing economic modes of production throughout history. Capitalism today represents the highest stage of class conflict and can only be ameliorated by a wholesale overthrow of the current mode of production by the working class. For feminists, Marxist insights into the economic roots of modern-day inequality are invaluable to understand women's struggles today, especially in the West. Yet some feminists have taken Marxist theory to task for failing to gender class struggle and the way that women's oppression deeply permeates every class. Social reproduction theory has redefined the labour that is central to Marxist notions of economy to include the labour of reproduction and regeneration of labour, processes that are normally excluded from the formal economic sphere and disproportionately impact women.¹⁹⁴ Other feminists agree on the need to expand Marxist methodology to

193. Frederick Engels, "Historical Materialism," in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Progress Publishers, 1970), 1. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch03.htm>.

194. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London,

include feminist concerns in the scope of its dialectics. Silvia Federici reiterates that “Marx’s historical materialist method, which posits that in order to understand history and society we must understand the material conditions of social reproduction, is crucial for a feminist perspective.”¹⁹⁵ This is because he gives us the “political language” with which to combat capitalism and to think of alternative futures, through a method that brings attention to the material fabric of individual lives and the interwoven nature of the economic and political. But Federici points out that while the Marxist framework is “indispensable” for feminist struggle, it is “not sufficient”¹⁹⁶ due to its lack of gendered analysis. Putting her own spin on the Marxist phrase, she quips that feminists who embrace Marxist thought “may want to ensure that between hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, and criticizing after dinner, there would remain some time for everyone to share cleaning and childcare.”¹⁹⁷ Federici, and other feminist Marxists work with Marxist categories while expanding them to include a revised understanding of human labour, not all of which is wage labour under capitalists. The insights of these writers makes “visible a new terrain of accumulation and struggle, as well as the full extent of capital’s dependence on unpaid labor and the full length of the working day.”¹⁹⁸ Their intervention allows for a feminist reconceptualization of Marxist dialectics to include their subjective experiences in anti-capitalist efforts.

Pluto Press, 2017).

195. Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (United States: PM Press, 2018), 154.

196. Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 152.

197. Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 154.

198. Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, 156.

Bannerji presents a rigorous Marxist methodology and epistemology that caters to feminist demands for a mediation between subjective and objective positions. She is critical of strands of feminist theory that tend towards binary representations between the universal and particular, or subjectivity and materiality. In her view, a genuine feminist epistemological approach needs to be able to mediate between the two poles to provide a “mediational and formational view of social practice.”¹⁹⁹ As she explains,

The explanatory, analytical and descriptive/ethnographic task of social theory requires that it be able to dis-cover the mediations of different social moments in non-polar terms, and bring out the ‘specificity’ of any fragment of experience by providing it with a general name as well as with a particular authenticity at the same time.²⁰⁰

Bannerji deftly grasps the relational dynamic between the particular and the general and requires an effective feminist social theory to be able to mediate between the two with precision and depth. After examining traditional feminist theory, identity theory and classical Marxist theory and determining that they do not adequately grasp this mediation, she proposes a Marxist feminist dialectical approach that can better perform this function. As a woman of colour, Bannerji poignantly describes her feelings of exclusion from feminist theory and politics, through textual and social practices that render non-white women feeling invisible.²⁰¹ She charges feminist theory of a “false universality”²⁰² that implies that all women are oppressed equally and have similar subjectivities. As a result, feminist theory becomes a facade to serve the interests of a privileged class of women.²⁰³ On the other hand, Bannerji posits that a

199. Himani Bannerji, *The Ideological Condition: Selected Essays on History, Race and Gender* (Boston: Brill, 2020), 62.

200. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 61.

201. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 60-1.

202. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 64.

203. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 61.

“politics of difference has rejected the universalist position.”²⁰⁴ Referring to the politicized use of different identities that is common in Western countries today (similar to the identity theory described in the previous section), Bannerji critiques this ideological view as erring on the opposite side of a shallow recognition of particularity that neglects important commonalities amongst women. A politics of difference

invents multiple political personalities within one subject and invests expressions of these and other different subject positions with an equal and real value. This creates the possibility of a positive coexistence among them, without any regard for either experiential coherence or the genuinely antagonistic social relations that underlie the speech act or expression and thus provide the context of and the reasons for the "difference."²⁰⁵

By focusing on the equal registers of expression and recognition arising from different identities, the politics of difference elides the social and historical relations that have created the inequality to begin with. For example, not including white heterosexual women in the politics of difference avoids implicating them as agents of difference as well as of superiority to non-white women. Hence this kind of identity politics skews an accurate analysis of women’s equality by not giving a “social analysis which will reveal the sameness of social relations that construct the experience of ‘white’ privilege and ‘black’ oppression.”²⁰⁶ Bannerji notes that the politics of difference is based on the liberal economic model of the marketplace in which freedom is equated with an equal opportunity to compete. This generalized model neglects the intricacies of individual identity, reducing “the concept of experience from an interpreted, dynamic process of subjective appropriation of the social into a far more static notion of

204. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 65.

205. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 65.

206. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 67.

'identity.'"²⁰⁷ While dominant theorizations of feminism can prioritize sameness, the politics of difference skews the balance towards an atomized and disaggregated view of the social. Both these views do not present robust feminist epistemologies and theories that can reconcile women's unique political subjectivities with a larger understanding of the social as a collective.

To fill this theoretical gap, Bannerji draws on the tradition of Marxist feminism, while critiquing some of its gender-blindness and supplementing it with a new methodology of dialectics that can better mediate between the particular and universal for questions of women's politics. Using the starting point of Marx's "sensuous, practical human activity"²⁰⁸ as the basis of the social world, she situates feminist theory within the overarching structure of capitalism. Just as capitalism cannot be understood apart from its specific social and cultural context, she asserts that "'race,' gender and patriarchy are inseparable from class, as any social organization rests on inter-subjective relations of bodies and minds marked with socially constructed difference on the terrain of private property as capital."²⁰⁹ With this conceptualization of race and gender as intertwined with processes of capitalist exploitation, she builds a feminist model of Marxist dialectics that can mediate between women's unique experiences and larger socio-economic frameworks. She gestures to the gaps in Marxist/socialist feminism that occlude an engagement with issues of race and gender, especially for non-white women, and implicates this omission as undermining the legitimacy of Marxist feminism. Hence her inclusion of these axes of difference as integral to socialism builds

207. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 67.

208. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 121.

209. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 12.

on the Marxist critique of capitalism to make it viable for a robust feminist theory today. She explains the logic behind Marxist dialectical mediation:

The sole purpose of the concept is to capture the dynamic, showing how social relations and forms come into being in and through each other, to show how a mode of production is an historically and socially concrete formation. This approach ensures that the integrative actuality of social existence is neither conceptually ruptured and presented fragmentarily nor abstracted into an empty universalism.²¹⁰

Through this epistemological approach, Bannerji reconciles the two polar tendencies of feminism and identity politics that she sees as dominating the theory and practice of feminism today, and in their place offers a transformational dialectical approach that can combine both universal and particular ingredients of women's experiences living in Western capitalism. She is thus able to use the strengths of Marxist methodology but apply it to the specific historical moment of capitalism as it affects women today. Even though the utility of her approach may be questioned in the context of non-Western societies that are not as deeply implicated in capitalism, her feminist methodology is invaluable for feminist theory, offering an alternative to traditional feminist theory, politics of identity, and gender-blind forms of Marxism. Her feminist Marxist dialectics allows me to envision a generous dialogue between particular forms of feminist expression and larger expressions of women's political identities.

Conclusion

The chapter outlines the emergence of poststructuralism to interrogate its limits in reconciling elements of universalism and particularity. For feminism, questions of women's subjectivity and political agency are paramount concerns, with many critics of feminist poststructuralism pointing out that it does not present strategic, practical, collective solutions

210. Bannerji, *Ideological Condition*, 75.

to quotidian struggles for women's empowerment and equality. Through alternative feminist theorizations of the possible reconciliation between difference and sameness, or the subjective and objective, I explore a nuanced universalism as a normative goal for feminism. For the literature on religious agency, these alternative feminist conceptualizations allow me to push beyond a one-dimensional view of pious agency and to explore other elements of religious agency, such as values of feminism and rationality, among others. As mentioned earlier, I lean heavily on Sekyi-Otu's concept of left universalism, which he takes to be an approach of "native universalism" in which a culture or group, in his case African culture, can retrieve values from within that are universally applicable. This approach is corroborated from a gendered perspective by writers such as Code, who describes ecological thinking as a feminist philosophical perspective which allows for subjective, imaginative, context-specific knowledge production, but without giving up universal claims. She critiques the epistemological model of autonomy in philosophy based on rational, objective thought which dismisses feminist approaches as less authoritative and valuable. Khader presents a strong case for decolonizing universalism, and ways in which we can expand feminist theory's tendency to support Enlightenment values in favour of a more nuanced perspective of transnational feminism that can incorporate "non-Western" values. Irigaray critiques the Western model of universalism present in philosophy, psychology and political life that presumes a male agent. McNay and feminist interpretations of Adorno present views of women's identity that can account for women's subjectivities in universal assertions of politics. Finally, Bannerji's Marxist feminist methodology allows for categories of race and gender to be included in a critique of capitalism. By stretching an emphasis on feminist difference to incorporate particularity into an account of

universalism, I challenge literature on poststructuralist religious agency which focuses on these women's unique subjectivities. Using the theoretical groundings of these authors and others, I explore how Muslim women must i) define their own feminist and political commitments, and ii) not be defined by an emphasis on difference that is determined apriori, either negatively or positively, by Western epistemological and political commitments. In the next chapter, I will investigate race and culture as another site of difference that can be reconciled with universalism.

Chapter 4 – Cultural Universalisms

Superiority? Inferiority?

Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?¹

There are two ways to lose yourself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution into the 'universal'.... My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.²

The previous chapter outlined some feminist theorizations to reconcile particularity and universalism, as an antidote to modes of poststructuralism that emphasize difference and embodiment over commonalities and objective concerns. Since the literature on religious women's agency is situated within both poststructural and postcolonial frameworks, and the women's difference is highlighted not only through a gendered perspective, but also through their culture/religion, this chapter will discuss cultural universalisms. After a brief introduction to the field of postcolonialism, I will show some of its critics who consider it as promoting cultural essentialisms over more strategic and collective social and political goals. Here I will also consider some of the academic elitism that has plagued the field of postcolonial studies and continues to do so. Through some thematic theorizations of possible reconciliations between an exclusive focus on difference and an overly generalized universalism, I will sketch possibilities for a nuanced universalism that can allow for ethical intersubjectivity between cultures. Starting with Sekyi-Otu's conceptualization of left universalism, I demonstrate its

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 206.

2. Aime Cesaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez," in *How to Liberate Marx from His Eurocentrism: Notes on African/Black Marxism*, by M. Salah Hassan (Kassel Germany: *Documenta*, 2012), 38.

unique methodology that allows for a conceptualization of the human that can allow different cultures to articulate their own universal expressions. As Sekyi-Otu builds on Frantz Fanon's understanding of humanism, I will discuss Fanon's understanding of the role of universalism in anticolonial struggle. I will also use Jeff Noonan's example of concrete universalism as a demonstration of the applicability of Sekyi-Otu's concept that prioritizes and strengthens struggles of the oppressed for liberation. I utilize Dipesh Chakrabarty and Susan Buck-Morss' works to critique universal forms of history that have sidelined non-Western populations through various means. Finally, I will show Idil Abdillahi and Rinaldo Walcott's theorization of BlackLife as a dialectical approach that explains the economic, political and social embeddedness of Black and coloured bodies in processes of capitalism and modernity. For the postcolonial literature on pious agency, these theorizations on cultural expressions of universal values demonstrate that these pious women can express universal values such as humanism through their religious identities, instead of being defined primarily by their difference.

Tracing the Genealogy of Postcolonialism

A precise definition of postcolonialism is difficult to ascertain due to its very different origins as both a historical-political phenomenon and an intellectual area of study. The immense legacy and continuing impact of colonialism as an imperialist project of political, geographical and economic expansion, along with its psychological consequences, haunts the contours of postcolonialism both as a means of revolutionary praxis and as a theoretical lens. Although early European colonization occurred in the 16th-19th centuries, postcolonialism today usually refers to the period of direct colonial rule dating from the late 19th century to the post-WWII period. By the end of the Scramble for Africa in 1914, almost all of the continent had

been annexed and colonized by seven European states. Such broad and sweeping conquests did not come without brutality and violence, and this dimension of colonialism lives on despite the formal end of colonialism near the end of the 20th century. As a result of this historical legacy, postcolonialism retains a strong basis in anticolonial praxis, as epitomized through the works of Fanon, who participated in the Algerian struggle for independence. As Robert Young states, “Colonialism was a system that created rigid structures of profound inequality at many levels, justified ideologically by the doctrine of race. Postcolonialism resists such inhumanity: it assumes and claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being, the same rights and the same access to impartial justice.”³ Postcolonialism in its origins was conceived as a tool to counter colonial impositions and establish political and economic stability for the colonized.

However, postcolonial theory as it exists today in the academy is a critical study of the continuing and wide-ranging impact of colonialism, especially from a discursive and cultural perspective. Postcolonial theory aims to locate the source of lingering colonial influence, whether political, economic, cultural or psychological, and to change it at the core by changing mindsets and speaking back to power and privilege. Much as feminism has slowly gained ground and has now become widely accepted, postcolonialism seeks to eliminate prejudicial views on race for struggles for justice and knowledge production. Due to this, the academic study of postcolonialism is interdisciplinary, and is a useful theoretical lens in many disciplines, such as literature, sociology, feminism, international relations, Marxism, and anthropology. As Young asserts:

3. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 29.

There is thus no single entity called 'postcolonial theory': Postcolonial theory involves not static ideas or practices but creative interconnections: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures. It is the product of a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners seek to change further.⁴

The intellectual study of postcolonialism remains scattered, ranging across disciplinary boundaries and with regional variations; it encompasses an interrelated set of perspectives, some of which can interact dialectically but some of which can be contradictory. Enakshi Dua agrees that "[p]ostcolonial theory has been a difficult field to define. While the term evokes the image of the period after colonialism, the field has come to refer to the sustained study of colonialism and its past and present effects in both former colonies and metropolitan settings."⁵ Many thinkers from different countries involved in independence struggles made rich theoretical contributions to postcolonial theory in the 20th century, such as Fanon during Algerian independence, and Mahatma Gandhi during the struggle for India's independence. The academic study of postcolonialism became widely recognized after Said's foundational work, *Orientalism*, published in 1978.⁶ In it, Said coins the word "Orientalism" to describe the way the West considers inferior and marginalizes the "East" when producing knowledge, and analyzes how this is curated by imperial legacies. He uses the technique of colonial discourse analysis to analyze Western representations of the East in texts to uncover explicit or implicit assumptions. Said draws heavily on poststructuralist ideas of discursive analysis to analyze Oriental prejudices in dominant forms of thought. Although Foucault was not a postcolonial scholar, his

4. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 36-7.

5. Enakshi Dua, "Revisiting Genealogies: Theorizing Anti-Racism beyond the Impasse," in *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories*, eds. Abigail B. Bakan and Enakshi Dua (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 21.

6. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

work has deeply influenced contemporary and popular postcolonial thought - Said's reliance on discourse analysis as a means to uncover Eurocentrism and racism is indebted to Foucault's methodology, since he highlights the overarching and amorphous nature of power in shaping our lives and institutions.

I will do a broad sketch of overlapping but distinct branches of postcolonial theory, describing five divergent theoretical perspectives – anticolonialism, neocolonialism, decolonialism, Marxist postcolonialism and feminism postcolonialism – and show how each of them conceptualizes the nature of colonial violence and its possible solutions. Anticolonialism may be understood as the theoretical approach most closely aligned with the earlier decolonization struggles of the late 20th century. As mentioned earlier, the writer who is most recognized for his anticolonial theory is Fanon. Fanon was a black French psychiatrist born in Martinique in 1925, who died in 1961 from cancer after fighting French colonialism in Algeria; he was very much a man of action and participated actively in anti-imperialist struggle. He is best known for his books *Black Skin, White Masks*, *A Dying Colonialism*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the latter book, the first chapter is entitled “On Violence,” and discusses the positive impact of violence as a means of defeating the effects of the initial violence of colonization – he speaks of this as a collective catharsis which can help the colonized expel internalized notions of inferiority.⁷ He was a psychiatrist, and he applied his work on colonialism to his practice; he incorporated his psychoanalytic background into his work, advocating for a deeper understanding of culture and the integration of patients into their larger families and communities instead of medication and institutionalization. Furthermore, he used class analysis

7. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

to further understand his patient's backgrounds and experiences and to propose innovative solutions. For example, he wrote about the role of the hijab in the Algerian war as a sign of resistance against the colonizers, who often used unveiling ceremonies as a sign of victory. He advocated for using traditions and culture, such as the wearing of hijab, as a form of anti-imperial struggle.⁸ Fanon studied under Aime Cesaire in Martinique, who was one of the founders of the negritude movement to raise awareness about black consciousness as a means of resisting cultural imperialism; Cesaire's framework of critique and literary theory to help build and cultivate black consciousness as resistance to imperial forces greatly influenced Fanon's thought. Today, postcolonial thought is being used to counter indigenous colonization and black discrimination. As a result, anticolonialism is also being used to describe contemporary forms of resistance to existing colonialism and colonial structures. For example, Katherine McKittrick is a contemporary anticolonial writer who centers black experience and explores how black creative texts can represent forms of anticolonial politics.⁹ Anticolonial theory represents a form of postcolonial theory that is concerned with opposing and overthrowing colonial structures through radical internal or external revolutionary actions – the emphasis is on praxis instead of theory.

Neocolonialism literally means “new colonialism” and it refers to the indirect continuation of colonialism through economic, cultural and legal means. Neocolonialism results in dependence or subservience on the part of the colonized country, which often gives up some political control or is financially obligated in ways that infringe on its autonomy. There have

8. Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” in *Decolonization: Perspectives From Now and Then*, ed. Prasenjit Duara (London: Routledge, 2003).

9. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

been numerous analyses of the mutually interdependent nature of the international world system, especially as processes of globalization have made states and borders less important. Two theories of international relations that show the nature of economic neocolonialism are world systems theory and dependency theory. Fernand Braudel was a French historian who advanced an international, interconnected theory of history instead of focusing on events and individuals. Emphasizing the “longue duree,” he believed that continuities in societal structures over time had historical importance, instead of social changes enacted through conscious actors. For Braudel, deep structures could be environmental or psychological, and could structure world events beyond human consciousness.¹⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein is a well-known proponent of world systems theory; in this framework, the industrialized core benefits from the underdeveloped periphery countries, which usually export raw materials. This causes them to be dependent on a single market and at the whims of the market.¹¹ As Ché Guevara, an Argentine revolutionary, said:

We, politely referred to as "underdeveloped," in truth, are colonial, semi-colonial or dependent countries. We are countries whose economies have been distorted by imperialism, which has abnormally developed those branches of industry or agriculture needed to complement its complex economy. "Underdevelopment," or distorted development, brings a dangerous specialisation in raw materials, inherent in which is the threat of hunger for all our peoples. We, the "underdeveloped," are also those with the single crop, the single product, the single market. A single product whose uncertain sale depends on a single market imposing and fixing conditions. That is the great formula for imperialist economic domination.¹²

10. Fernand Braudel, “Histoire et sciences sociales: La Longue duree, » *Réseaux* 5, no. 27 (1987).

11. Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

12. Che Guevara, “Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anticolonial Struggle?” (1961 speech) in *The Che Reader* (Che Guevara Studies Center: Ocean Press, 2005).
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1961/04/09.htm>.

This quote concretizes Wallerstein's theory of world systems and demonstrates the ongoing economic effects of colonialism in the global neoliberal market that assumes equal players. Samir Amin is a political scientist and world systems theorist who was a proponent of dependency theory to counter modernization theories that asserted that all societies progress through similar stages towards similar ends.¹³ Applying Marxist theory at the global level, he believes that poor countries in the global capitalist economy can never "catch up" to more wealthy countries due to inherent polarizations within the system and monopolies. Hence the only possible way for them to overcome this dependency is to "de-link" from the world economy. This contrasts the Eurocentric view of modernization that implies that all countries are on the same linear path to modernization. If we situate the international financial system into Wallerstein and Amin's theories, it is evident that global institutions are complicit in enforcing compliance with neoliberal dictates. For example, the International Monetary Fund, enacts economic control over periphery countries through structural adjustment programs which require domestic economic changes, such as the opening up of markets, in exchange for loans. Finance capital and developmental aid can also be used as a means of neocolonial economic control, transforming periphery economies in the process, through quotidian practices of compliance.

A second important aspect of neocolonial rule is the influence of historical memory and psychological domination. The role of language in perpetuating imperialism is vast; language can both disempower through the obliteration of native languages and become a tool for

13. Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*, trans. Brian Pearce (Monthly Review Press, 1976).

decolonization when used as a means of empowering native cultures. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o is a Kenyan author and academic whose essay, “Decolonizing the Mind,” explores the role of language in African theatre, viewing the introduction of English as a “cultural bomb” with the ability to annihilate culture. He says, “The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environments, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”¹⁴ If language can be understood as the accumulation of the historical artifacts of a culture, then the disappearance of language can also be seen as the extermination of a people, its culture and history. The importance of preserving culture as a way to combat colonialism is also a theme in Walter Mignolo’s work; he advocates for “epistemic disobedience” as a way of “delinking” from the influences of imperialism to undo some of the historical legacy of colonialism.¹⁵ Historical and cultural memory, especially as preserved through language, can be seen as a key element of neocolonial rule. To summarize, “new” forms of colonialism can perpetuate inequality through economic, political and cultural avenues. As Young points out, the West is not a homogenous entity, with extreme polarizations of poverty existing within state borders, particularly in the United States, but the West “still controls the normative framework of global institutions and structures, from accounting to commerce to the Internet to legal systems to universities. The world as it is now organized internationally operates fundamentally according to European norms and values, starting with the nation-state.”¹⁶ Even though the global structures of power

14. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1986).

15. Walter Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, issue 7-8 (February 2010).

16. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 32.

and state boundaries look very different today than in the heyday of colonialism, neocolonialism will continue to endure as long as the unequal balance of economic and political power persists.

Another branch of postcolonial theory involves a more recent shift towards awareness of ongoing settler colonialism, especially for Indigenous peoples. The ongoing problem of Indigenous oppression demands a renewed interest in colonialism, especially as it is justified and sedimented by liberal democratic norms, such as in Canada. Referred to using different terminology, such as decoloniality, decolonial theory, indigenous studies or decolonization, more attention is being paid to this neglected area of colonial impact. Here, I want to quickly sketch different movements towards Indigenous decolonization and rights in different parts of the world, before discussing three indigenous authors in detail from the North American context. An emerging movement in Latin America is pushing for delinking from European hegemony and knowledge production. Mignolo is well-known for his views on decoloniality,¹⁷ and Maria Lugones writes from a decolonial feminist position, highlighting Latin American cultural, social and historical contexts to resist coloniality and modernity, especially through the lens of gender.¹⁸ Another regional movement against colonization can be seen in the subaltern movement in India. Critiquing the male-dominated, elitist representatives of postcolonial states and knowledge production, the subaltern movement seeks to situate discussions of imperialism from the point of view of the common people, such as farmers. Chakrabarty, in his book

17. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

18. Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2010).

Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,¹⁹ and Spivak, in her groundbreaking article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”²⁰ both point out that Western academic thinking, especially in service of economic interests, privileges certain Western voices over non-Western ones. Returning to the North American Indigenous context, Leanne Simpson advocates for a renewed revival of Indigenous knowledges and lifestyles as a way to counter hegemonic colonial forces in Canada. She prioritizes activism and alternative ways of knowledge production to bring about decolonization through both political and subjective registers.²¹ Glenn Coulthard is a Canadian scholar of Indigenous studies who has written the well-known book, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. In it, he uses Fanon’s work to challenge liberal democratic norms that maintain the material and symbolic oppression of Indigenous peoples in Canada.²² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, in their forceful article entitled, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” are critical of overly symbolic uses of decolonization metaphors and remind us that even though we live in an era where formal colonialism has ended, repatriation of Indigenous lands and life is an outstanding colonial violence that has not been corrected.²³ The use of the word decolonization in everyday life in various settings takes away from its origins as a tool of empowerment and rebellion in the lives of the oppressed. A quick foray into literatures of decoloniality, and statistics about Indigenous

19. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

20. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Routledge, 1994).

21. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

22. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

23. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012).

violence and poverty, show that the legacy of colonialism is alive and well, and impacting Indigenous peoples' lives and possibilities for the future. Other regional movements, such as Thiong'o's push for a revival of African languages, the Indian subaltern movement to showcase a bottom-up approach to decolonization, and the Latin American movement to delink from Western influence, demonstrate that resistance is alive and well in various parts of the world.

Traditional Marxism and postcolonial theory have often seemed to be at odds, due to the primacy of discourse analysis as a postcolonial methodology, while Marxism focuses on material and social lives, as they are shaped by class. But a closer examination of the two can point to some productive overlaps, as many thinkers have demonstrated. As mentioned earlier, Amin takes a Marxist approach and applies it at the international level to showcase the tendency towards inequality and dependency engendered by the global capitalist system. Salem is a contemporary scholar who navigates Marxist and postcolonial theories and their potential compatibility through an analysis of Gramsci and Fanon's thought to examine possibilities for resistance and revolution in Egypt.²⁴ At a more theoretical level, Bannerji incorporates imperialism into her analysis of class methodologically. By starting from the concrete and moving to the universal, she grasps the dialectical core of Marxism to overcome identity politics and to show that class remains central if it is understood as an *internal* relation that includes gender, race, and imperialism. She states, "'Race'... is a collection of discourses of colonialism and slavery, but firmly rooted in capitalism in its different aspects through time. As it stands, 'race' cannot be disarticulated from 'class' any more than milk can be separated from

24. Sara Salem, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

coffee once they are mixed, or the body divorced from consciousness in a living person.”²⁵

While we can separate class from other parts of our identity for analytic purposes, in experience they all work together with other parts of our identity – if understood this way, then anticolonial struggles are also anti-capitalist struggles. As I have shown through the varieties of postcolonial theory, reducing the struggle against colonialism to a purely cultural task misses the real economic, material and political drive behind anti-colonial movements. Marxist postcolonialists argue that by focusing only on the internal, cultural and psychological elements of colonialism, structural elements such as capitalist exploitation are neglected, and this reduces the revolutionary potential of postcolonial efforts.

The last branch of postcolonial theory I will sketch is feminist postcolonialism. One of the foundational authors for this approach is Mohanty, whose article entitled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” shows the impact of colonialism, both discursively and practically, on women in the global south. She criticizes privileged centres of liberal and western feminism that purport to represent all women but look down on women in the colonized world. She says, “I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of western scholarship on the 'third world' in the context of a world system dominated by the west on the other, characterize a sizable extent of western feminist work on women in the third world.”²⁶ To remediate this, Mohanty calls for women in the Global south to be given equal representation in literature, and to speak for themselves from their own experiences.

25. Himani Bannerji, “Building from Marx: Reflections on Class and Race,” *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2005): 149.

26. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (Spring-Autumn 1984): 335.

Furthermore, Salem critiques narrow understandings of intersectionality and shows how it has been coopted by the neoliberal university. Understanding intersectionality as a “traveling theory” allows it to be used in transnational contexts for women in the Global south.²⁷ Feminist postcolonialists focus on the impacts of colonialism on women in the global south, pushing for equal representation with Western women and greater understanding of their unique positionalities.

To summarize, all of these branches of postcolonial theory involve both an internal and an external aspect – for all of these thinkers, decolonization comprises a psychological component and a program for liberation from structures, whether political, economic or cultural. The emphases on different means of postcolonial struggle varies in the branches of postcolonial theory discussed, with anticolonialism and Marxist postcolonialism leaning towards material and practical movements for achieving independence from colonialism, while certain strands of decolonial theory and feminist postcolonialism prioritize psychological, cultural and epistemological means of challenging colonial influence. A broad overview of different theoretical strands of postcolonial theory demonstrates the way that theories can respond to material and historical contexts. Some of these theories emerged to combat the immediate injustices faced by colonized peoples while others involve the intellectual currents of their time. The intertwining of poststructuralism and postcolonialism is particularly relevant for my discussion since both seek to divest theory of overbearing Western universalisms, preferring a focus on particularity.

27. Sara Salem, “Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, issue 4 (2018).

Although there are many similarities between the intellectual fields of postcolonialism and poststructuralism, there are also divergences in the way the theories have taken shape and their aims in prioritizing particularity. Revisiting their respective genealogies can shed light on some of these overlapping areas and challenges. They both originated around the same period of time, with Lyotard dubbing the word “postmodernism” in 1979 and Said writing his impactful book in 1978. As mentioned earlier, Said was deeply influenced by postmodernist thinkers, especially Foucault, from whom he adapted his methodology of colonial discourse analysis. As Dua writes, “Said’s turn to Foucault was as much tied to understanding the operations of power as it was to understanding knowledge. Like Foucault, Said’s employment of the methodology of discourse was to illustrate the complexities of configurations and operations of power as impersonal, operating through a multiplicity of sites.”²⁸ Both theoretical perspectives critique universal notions of normativity that can have negative symbolic and material impacts on marginalized social groups. However, for feminist poststructuralism, discussed in the previous chapter, the purpose of critiquing generalized forms of theory is to allow for a focus on the oppression of women. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, critiques universalism to disentangle cultures or nations from the control of colonial structures, whether through liberatory struggles or through decolonizing the mind of the internalization of colonialism. Poststructuralism arose as a philosophical movement while postcolonialism arose as a socio-political tool of liberation as a response to the atrocities perpetuated in the name of colonialism, although it has now taken on the flavour of discursive and symbolic analysis. When comparing these two intellectual fields that champion difference – for feminist poststructuralism, on the basis of

28. Dua, “Revisiting Genealogies,” 30.

gender, and for postcolonialism, on the basis of race, broadly speaking, it is pertinent to recall the inherent fragility of all categories. Thinkers such as Butler have reminded us that gender cannot be reduced to biology or essentialized social constructions. Similarly, the defense of culture from colonialism and its lingering influence also needs to be tempered by the ambiguity that occurs when defining culture, especially when the definition is integral for political state-building and independence. Benedict Anderson gives a cogent analysis of the socially constructed nature of nationalisms which may be perceived as innate or natural, but which are inculcated through media and political propaganda.²⁹ Intersectionality is also a theoretical lens which grapples with the implications of different identity categories such as gender and race, but it also struggles with how to incorporate these particular identities within larger political frameworks.³⁰ Imbuing theoretical and political significance to very personal identifications can be a difficult task of translation, fraught with the risk of essentializing identities or undermining personal self-understandings for theoretical intelligibility. Humeira Iqtidar ponders the significance of cultural categories such as “Western” and “Muslim,” especially as they are used for colonial and political justifications, such as Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory.³¹ This is pertinent for postcolonial theory, which often takes the starting point of Western colonialism as its *raison d’être*. Iqtidar acknowledges that projects of cultural affirmation can often fall prey to essentializations but she does see value in broad cultural categories, stating:

29. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

30. David McNally, “Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory” in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

31. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1996).

There is some analytical use to the terms “Western” and “Muslim” societies, if only because many within those societies believe there to be a difference. These differences do not stem from inherent, essentialized characteristics somehow common to Muslims across distinct periods in history and living in vastly diverse continents, but from the localized historical trajectories that operate in an interactive, though nonlinear, manner. The interactive, interdependent nature of cultural, political, and economic changes means that there is no “native” core to be separated from the “Western,” and yet there is a specific context to developments in each; the two categories do not contain identical entities.³²

Iqtidar’s analysis of cultural categories deserves some analysis as she is careful to consider both intrinsic motivations and historical conditions that form cultural identities. While she does not believe in any “native” characteristics internal to cultures, she takes seriously the sense of belonging that has been forced over generations through “cultural, political and economic changes.” Different historical trajectories have positioned some groups in different socio-political locations, and this is corroborated by present-day cultural and economic realities. The haphazard, nonlinear nature of these trajectories is also important, as teleological hierarchies can be detrimental and inaccurate. According to Iqtidar, cultural categories of “Western” and “Muslim” carry analytical import but must be used carefully so as not to replicate essentialized notions of culture as regimented and unchanging entities. Indeed, the aim of this chapter is to establish a theoretical foundation for culture that can avoid its reification either as a particularized essence or an overly generalized universal. Iqtidar also points out that the philosophical and political trajectories of the “West” and “Muslim” have rendered them with different weight as categories of identity. She says:

It seems to me that the category “Muslim” is open to greater variation and blurring than the category “Western.” More importantly... it is possible to argue that the sense of rupture is less pronounced within “Western” thought – it is in a sense more “traditional”

32. Humeira Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists? Jamaat-i-Islami and Jama’at-ud’Da’wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago University Press, 2011), 9-10.

– given the relatively unbroken and continuous philosophical dialogue, dependent upon largely the same authors, books, and philosophers.³³

Iqtidar nuances her argument about the fragility of cultural categories by demonstrating that the project of building ideological affiliation is related to factors such as intellectual continuity and geo-political unity. She believes that while the West has a strong sense of unification around philosophical understandings and politico-economic experiences that emphasize universalism, Muslims do not have a coherent historical identity and are more divided by geographical and sectarian boundaries. When discussing poststructuralism and postcolonialism, both of which prioritize particular identities over generalized ones, it is imperative to be self-reflexive about what categories are being used and how, to avoid essentializations. Especially in analyzing religious women's agency in the Islamic context, this reminder is timely and important.

To understand the origins and trajectories of academic disciplines as vast as poststructuralism and postcolonialism, power dynamics must also be taken into consideration. Generally speaking, poststructuralism emerged as a Western response to the intellectual challenges presented by the Western phenomenon of the Enlightenment. Poststructuralist feminism has also been a largely Western enterprise – as detailed in previous chapters, feminism as a political and intellectual project has been slow to respond to the challenge of incorporating difference. In contrast, postcolonialism emerged as a non-Western response to Western colonialism – it contains revolutionary ideas about independence and autonomy through culture and nation. The different origins of both fields have led to divergences in

33. Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists?* 10.

intellectual paths, although there are also similarities, as mentioned earlier. On the whole, although both theories originated around the same time, postcolonialism appears more fragmented and less developed than poststructuralism. As Iqidar suggests, Western identity and academic pursuits have achieved a level of hegemony in a way that other cultural identities have not. Said outlines that Western complicity and interests dictated the subordination of the “East” and justified this through intellectual forms of racism. As Dua explains, “Said argued that Orientalism is a knowledge system that operates in the service of the West’s inferior ‘Other,’ a manoeuvre that in turn constructs the West’s self image as a superior civilization.”³⁴ From its origins, non-Western academic pursuits were not equipped with the same resources and privileges as Western intellectual endeavours, which were considered authoritative. The many distinct yet overlapping theoretical strands of postcolonial theory also demonstrate its internal discontinuity. While there is also healthy disagreement within poststructuralism, as described in the previous chapter, there is arguably less theoretical divergence in its purpose and goals. For example, while there is a burgeoning literature on universal feminist agency that incorporates some of the concerns of poststructuralism (as detailed in the second chapter), there is no similar specialization of postcolonial literature that caters to cultural universalisms. One of the closest studies of culture as a theoretical and political phenomenon occurs in the field of comparative political theory, but even this field is fraught with concerns about the ethics around comparing cultures with a vastly different power differential (as will be discussed in detail later). Within postcolonial theory, there has been hesitation in accepting theory, since it is intertwined with what has largely been Western assumptions of universalism. There is

34. Dua, “Revisiting Genealogies,” 29.

internal debate about not just the possibility, but the desirability of finding common ground with colonizing epistemologies and philosophies. While Fanon is open to pursuing a version of humanism as a normative goal for the colonized, other postcolonial thinkers such as Césaire are suspicious of Western epistemological categories and prefer a return to native culture.³⁵ These differences in the goals of postcolonial theory are evidence of the fractured nature of the field, partly due to its emergence as a counterhegemonic force against Western colonialism and its concomitant philosophy. The ongoing power differential between postcolonial theorists and Western colonizing powers and academia has been a mitigating factor in the development of a stronger and more cohesive field.

While there are various theoretical branches of postcolonial theory which emphasize both transformational and symbolic goals, there has been a general trend towards internal decolonization and a wariness towards normative theory. Notably, there has been excellent recent research to reconcile apparently contradictory theoretical threads of postcolonial theory and more universalized theories, such as Marxism. Dua points out that rigid genealogies of theories can often serve to conceal important moments of creative synthesis around issues of race.³⁶ She critiques narrow constructions of postcolonial theory that focus on symbolic forms of decolonization over structural ones: “By characterizing postcolonial theory as being devoid of considerations of material relations... critics not only polarize theorizing about race and racism, but obscure the tensions that actually inscribe this body of thought.”³⁷ Abigail Bakan agrees that a renewed effort to create dialogue between narrow understandings of postcolonialism

35. Aime Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

36. Dua, “Revisiting Genealogies,” 21-2.

37. Dua, “Revisiting Genealogies,” 23.

and more generalized theories such as Marxism could allow for “strengthened strategic alliances against racism, capitalism [and] imperialism.”³⁸ Social reproduction theory (SRT) also attempts to incorporate aspects of race as integral to a critique of capitalism. As Tithi Bhattacharya explains, “SRT treats questions of oppression (gender, race, sexuality) in distinctly nonfunctionalist ways precisely because oppression is theorized as structurally relational to, and hence shaped by, capitalist production rather than on the margins of analysis or as add-ons to a deeper and more vital economic process.”³⁹ We can recall that Bannerji also agrees that race and class are as miscible as milk and coffee and cannot be examined in isolation.⁴⁰ For these Marxist thinkers, colonialism is intertwined at the core with other imperial projects of capitalism and sexism and thus cannot be isolated from the totality of social experience. These attempts at synthesizing the study of culture and race along the lines of class and gender have made inroads into rigid conceptualizations of postcolonial theory as having strayed from its radical roots and lacking a robust framework for resistance to oppression. However, there are thinkers who remain critical about the current status of postcolonial theory as being preoccupied with positionality and difference to the detriment of more nuanced theoretical interventions into universalism. Sekyi-Otu delivers a sharp critique of the current state of postcolonial theory (and poststructuralism) which mandates that “the first and the last word we invoke and must invoke not only to assert our ethical, political and aesthetic claims and judgments, but also to justify them, can only come from our distinct language world and

38. Abigail B. Bakan, “Marxism and Anti-Racism: Rethinking the Politics of Difference,” in *Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories*, eds. Abigail B. Bakan and Enakshi Dua (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 117.

39. Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction,” in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 3.

40. Bannerji, “Building from Marx,” 149.

historical circumstance.”⁴¹ In his view, crude versions of postcolonial theory insist on a “preoccupation with what the empire and the racial order legislated by word and deed” and this can lead to a “seemingly permanent colonization of our discursive horizons.”⁴² What Sekyi-Otu objects to in these “strong program” versions of postcolonial theory is not the resistance against cultural imperialism, but the narrowing of vision that occurs when there is a singular focus on internal mechanisms of decolonization; this performs a double disservice to formerly colonized peoples who are deprived of the vision and theoretical tools with which to re-assert their place in history and philosophy. In his view, this truncates possibilities for resistance and transformation from within *and* without, through social, economic and political struggle. As Sekyi-Otu states, “From that horizon, the universal is presumed to be an exogenous principle fueled by the West’s will to power, and so calling for unyielding acts of discursive protectionism and resistance.”⁴³ Following Sekyi-Otu’s critique, this chapter will outline alternative theorizations of the universal that can extend beyond defensive forms of cultural protectionism to make interventions in theory.

To summarize, postcolonial theory is difficult to define precisely because of its varied use as a historical tool to repel colonialism and a discursive methodology to describe the cultural impacts of colonialism. It consists of a variety of overlapping and sometimes contradictory threads; namely, anticolonialism, neocolonialism, decolonialism/indigenous studies, Marxist postcolonialism and feminist postcolonialism. Postcolonialism emerged around the same time as the poststructuralist philosophy, and both share certain characteristics – but

41. Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 12-3.

42. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 11.

43. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 18.

there are also differences in their trajectories, goals and intellectual evolution. Their emphasis on particularity needs to be tempered by an acknowledgement of the limits of all identity categories and their tendency to essentialize, as well of the power dynamics that shape intellectual theories. There are some examples of a synthesis of postcolonial theory with universal categories such as class, although modern, “strong program” versions of postcolonial theory are still critiqued for their narrow focus and lack of engagement with structural problems and normative ideals. The next section will consider a critique of the academy mounted by many postcolonial thinkers due to its complicity in perpetuating colonial legacies.

Decolonizing the Academy

I have mentioned the imbrication of academia and politics in replicating power dynamics that have structured the field of postcolonial theory. The field arose as a counterhegemonic response to geo-political incursions and has evolved to serve as a critical academic study of the lingering impact of colonialism on culture. While other philosophies, such as poststructuralism, have largely originated and remained within the intellectual sphere, postcolonial theory, originating from postcolonialism as a political structure, starts from outside the academy and the politics it produces. In this section, I explore the tension created for postcolonial academics who must navigate their research within an institution and culture that has been built on the denial of non-Western perspectives. These academics must form their critique as intelligible with the “master’s tools,” to refer to an apt metaphor by Audre Lorde. This predicament comes with its own challenges, circumscribing research so that “only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.”⁴⁴ It also points to the urgent need to

44. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and*

“decolonize” the academy so that alternative frameworks are not only tolerated at a surface level, but genuine changes are made to epistemological and philosophical horizons to ensure meaningful forms of inclusion and to remediate historical legacies of colonial violence. As Brown points out, the ideal of tolerance in liberal societies can mask internal inequalities. She states, “Operating within an idiom of universal inclusion and justice, tolerance secures a hegemonic norm and manages unwanted differences without granting them substantive or even formal equality. Tolerance is not a synonym for equality but a supplement or substitute for it; liberal democratic equality deals in sameness, tolerance manages difference.”⁴⁵ Many authors have critiqued contemporary notions of tolerance for a superficial appeasement of difference while maintaining implicit power structures.⁴⁶ These norms of liberal tolerance also inform the academy, where tokenization is the norm and “decolonizing” is an ongoing and arduous task. Lorgia Garcia Pena expands on the colonizing tendencies of the university, which “creates hierarchies of people, knowledge, and spaces based on race. This process of exclusion – the colonizing project – is framed around narratives aimed at sustaining the dominant structures of power while also securing the complicity of students and faculty through investment in ideas of unity, progress, and diversity that are based on whiteness.”⁴⁷ As she emphasizes, initiatives to cater to diversity and form committees that seek out racial reform can also be problematic if the underlying colonial framework is not eliminated. This dissertation also represents an effort to decolonize current trends in literature in which religious agency is

Speeches (Berkeley Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

45. Wendy Brown, “Civilizational Delusions: Secularism, Tolerance, Equality,” *Theory & Event* 15, no. 2 (2012).

46. Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press Inc., 2000).

47. Lorgia Garcia Pena, *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 15.

primarily intelligible through the lens of difference. By asserting feminist and cultural universals, the project aims to unsettle boundaries of normative theory and allow a deeper engagement with common features of agency. Postcolonial writers such as Said, Chakrabarty, Buck-Morss and Mohanty have analyzed the unique academic challenges faced by writers who resist colonial knowledge systems.

Said is known for his cogent critique of Western academic scholarship which has historically structured the binary between the West and East in terms that have assigned power and privilege to Western civilization while the rest of the world's population, specifically the Muslim world, are considered inferior and uncivilized. This bifurcation of the world is accomplished through mechanisms of Orientalism, or the creation of artificial categories that structure our worldview regardless of the accuracy of this representation. Said describes: "As much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West."⁴⁸ This representation of the East has taken hold of our social imaginary, to use Taylor's term, and has impacted both culture and global politics. The influence of Orientalist ideas has occurred through "considerable material investment"⁴⁹ and a strategy of "flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."⁵⁰ The discrepancy in power between the West and the Oriental world is maintained through economic and political domination, but largely originates as an idea that is inculcated by proponents of the Western intellectual tradition. Said

48. Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

49. Said, *Orientalism*, 6.

50. Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

reiterates that “The nexus of knowledge and power creating ‘the Oriental’ and in a sense obliterating him as a human being is therefore not for me an exclusively academic matter. Yet it is an *intellectual* matter of some very obvious importance.”⁵¹ He especially implicates the social sciences, such as economics, politics, sociology, anthropology and philology, as explicitly political fields which contain hidden biases about Muslims, or those in the East. Said is careful to show the complexities involved in the reproduction of Orientalism as an all-encompassing feature of the modern world. According to him, Orientalism must be understood as:

[A] *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains it; it *is*, rather than expresses a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.⁵²

Said is careful to incorporate different material and intellectual entanglements in his explication of the project of Orientalism.

Through discourse analysis, Said breaks down the different levels in the construction and maintenance of Orientalism, including material, academic and political stages that converge to form a hegemonic relation of power. Said labels these different components of Orientalism “power political,” “power intellectual,” “power cultural” and “power moral” and outlines the ways in which they work together to become a dominating ideology.⁵³ Since his central preoccupation is the nexus of power and knowledge that branches off into various

51. Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

52. Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

53. Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

spheres, academia is one of his main targets of critique. Pena confirms the “problem of power” that ensures that the “corporate white supremacist colonizing university endorses minoritized representation but through a model of ‘diversity and inclusion’ that’s grounded in white domination.”⁵⁴ This is accomplished through various methods, such as hiring singular professors of colour to fulfil quotas, putting additional burden on faculty of colour to provide guidance and teaching, and the denial of tenure. Although Said’s concept of Orientalism can be critiqued for its primary focus on discourse (along the lines of critiques of poststructuralism mentioned in the previous chapter) and its inadvertent reification of the East-West binary, his important analysis structures the field of postcolonial theory and provides the basis for critiquing the academy as a colonial institution.

Chakrabarty agrees with Said’s premise of an underlying power dynamic in the trajectory of Western scholarship that circumscribes the research of postcolonial thinkers. In his influential book entitled *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, he builds on the theme of Orientalism and nuances it from a historical perspective. He analyzes the legacy of colonial thought through phenomenon such as secularism and capitalism; situating his critique of Eurocentrism within socio-political and philosophical contexts, he shows how processes of historicism have relegated the non-Western world to an inferior position from which they are expected to “catch up” to Western modernity. This teleological view is prevalent in the academy, and further legitimizes a hierarchy of race, with whiteness at the top and people of colour below. Chakrabarty states, “Modern politics is often justified as a story of human sovereignty acted out in the context of a ceaseless unfolding of unitary historical time. I

54. Pena, *Community as Rebellion*, 23.

argue that this view is not an adequate intellectual resource for thinking about the conditions for political modernity in colonial and postcolonial India.”⁵⁵ He shows this singular and immutable conception of time to be a conceit of European political and secular thought that is not applicable to the postcolonial world. He challenges this conceptualization with a fluid and manifold understanding of time that can contain multiple, overlapping trajectories for postcolonial states and peoples. Chakrabarty says, “[T]he task of conceptualizing practices of social and political modernity in South Asia often requires us to make the opposite assumption: that historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself.”⁵⁶ He is also critical of the second assumption of secular modernity in which the existence of religion predates modernity (or the “subtraction story” version of secularism expanded on by Taylor⁵⁷). As a historian, Chakrabarty makes a unique contribution to postcolonial critiques of the Western philosophy and scholarship through his critique of “historicism” as a more recent process of intellectual colonialism that utilizes a teleological narrative to justify the underdevelopment and moral inferiority of postcolonial states in the past few centuries. Chakrabarty explains, “Historicism—and even the modern, European idea of history—one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying ‘not yet’ to somebody else.... That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait.”⁵⁸ The project of historicizing the narrative of global politics justified the ongoing impact of capitalist colonialism through the inherent backwardness or inferiority of the colonized. This

55. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 15.

56. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

57. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 253.

58. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

narrative, “ranging from simple evolutionary schemas to sophisticated understandings of ‘uneven development’”⁵⁹ not only homogenizes the colonized in an unequal power dynamic, it does not allow recourse to alternative theorizations that can contextualize the inequality between the West and the East in processes of capitalist exploitation and colonial imposition. This intellectual paradigm has become a hallmark of modernity and has impacted academic research on the Global South.

Since historicizing, as Chakrabarty describes it, is primarily a theoretical justification of global inequality, the connection between power and knowledge is of utmost importance. In critiquing Western academia, he posits an external and internal critique of the ways in which Western scholarship can limit the contours of postcolonial research. For Chakrabarty, the political and economic legacy of imperialism has served to cement Western ideas in philosophical debates. Since academics engage with the prevalent ideas in intellectual circles, including those which are highlighted in prestigious journals, even those thinkers who wish to oppose hegemonic ideas of Western philosophy must grapple with it first; this poses limitations in the kinds of projects that are feasible and receive funding. Chakrabarty acknowledges that his project of “provincializing Europe” is also limited by these strictures in scope; he says, “I too write from within this inheritance. Postcolonial scholarship is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals—such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason—that were forged in eighteenth-century Europe and that underlie the human sciences.”⁶⁰ He gives the example of Fanon, who strives to encapsulate the Enlightenment ideal of human potential

59. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 9.

60. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 5.

in his anticolonial work, even when the reality of European colonialism has debased that ideal. Universal theories, such as that of abstract reason, form the backbone of modernity, both in thought and in politics, and postcolonial academics are put in the uncomfortable position of either relating to universals that have historically denied them their humanity, or rejecting them at the risk of marginalizing themselves. Aside from legacies of imperialism that have pushed some ideas as invaluable, there is an internal hierarchy in the academy that reveres the Western canon and invests it with authority. As Chakrabarty points out, “[The] engagement with European thought is also called forth by the fact that today the so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities.”⁶¹ He points out that some of this tradition, such as the philosophical lineage traced to the ancient Greeks, has been proven to be fabricated, but still retains sufficient legitimacy so as to appear unquestionable. The consequence of this can be that non-Western writers do not receive adequate training and creative control to articulate other versions of theory from their own regions and experiences. Postcolonial thinkers feel more comfortable engaging with canonical figures such as Kant and Weber, while eminent theorists from their own cultures need to be historicized in their particularity.⁶² The predominance of Western genealogy necessitates that non-Western thinkers take up the challenge of interrogating the boundaries of universalism that are presented to them in new ways. Instead of rejecting generalizations altogether or a defensive turning inwards towards particularity,

61. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 5.

62. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 6.

Chakrabarty agrees with Sekyi-Otu that creative engagement with formerly oppressive forms of universalism is needed. He iterates:

European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect us all— may be renewed from and for the margins. But, of course, the margins are as plural and diverse as the centers.⁶³

Postcolonial thinkers are faced with the added task of navigating dominant intellectual paradigms with a spirit of generosity, while gently pushing back against some of the implicit biases in these theorizations. Even as they struggle against uncritical forms of universalism, they must reckon with the legacy of these theories and work with “the master’s tools” to “dismantle the master’s house.”⁶⁴ There are external and internal impediments for thinkers who wish to center non-Western theories and experiences in their research in the academy; in very real ways, colonial imaginaries continue to structure the modus operandi of the university.

Overcoming academic obstacles to postcolonial research that contests dominant European imaginaries must also grapple with the problem of the translation of variegated life forms into a comparable language of academic intelligibility. As Chakrabarty explains, understanding the ethical issues around translating both languages and cultural norms has recently become a topic of interest and research. He explains, “There was a time – before scholarship itself became globalized – when the process of translating diverse forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin seemed to most social scientists an unproblematic proposition.”⁶⁵ In colonial settings,

63. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

64. Lorde, “The Master’s Tools,” 110.

65. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 17.

“rough translations” were considered adequate to understand native cultures and to impose “rough-and-ready methods of colonial rule”⁶⁶ He gives the example of analytical categories such as capital that were presumed to transcend European culture and to be applicable for all parts of the world. With the advent of postcolonialism, there is greater awareness of the unequal dynamic and violence that are inherent in a process of translation that begins with an assumption of cultural superiority. In its place, Chakrabarty posits that “what translation produces out of seeming ‘incommensurabilities’ is neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference.’”⁶⁷ He advocates for the difficult task of constructing alternate theorizations of culture and race that do not rest on easy liberal catchwords of equality, nor on reproductions of domineering dynamics. But if we consider that European philosophies still structure academic spaces and mindsets, the project of carrying out ethical translations contains complexities and dangers. The sub-field of comparative political theory is one area in which some of these struggles are described and represented.

Popularized in 1999 by Fred Dallmayr, comparative political theory arose as a corrective to the predominance of Western theorizing in the canon of political theory, and emphasized the theoretical study of other cultures, sometimes comparing Western and non-Western thought categories.⁶⁸ In Dallmayr’s view, current political theory performs the role of Western

66. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 17.

67. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 17.

68. Fred Dallmayr, *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory* (New York: Lexington Books, 1999).

hegemon and inflicts ongoing epistemological imperialism. He prefers an acknowledgement of difference through “lateral universals” and genuine cultural interrogation and contestation instead of a comparative approach that retains dominant categories.⁶⁹ Although there has been a rise in literature in comparative political theory (CPT), there are others who caution against simplistic comparisons; the entire project is fraught with questions about how to perform ethical translations of theories, and whether this is even possible when working within Western academic structures. Farah Godrej, in her book *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline*, gives a detailed exposition of the challenges confronting CPT scholars; she establishes some guidelines, limitations, and heuristic tools that can help the field become more focused and successful at its goal of destabilizing common perceptions of Western political theory.⁷⁰ Godrej views CPT as being its most powerful when it is conducted by physical self-immersion in another culture, and then re-location back into Western structures to communicate new forms of knowledge through discourse and writing. She sets criteria by which this self-dislocation and relocation can be done genuinely in order to exact more sound knowledge and asks important questions of some of the ethical challenges confronted to scholars of CPT, such as whether the entire enterprise rests on an assumption of Eurocentrism. Even Godrej’s careful examination of some of the pitfalls of CPT beg some questions about the feasibility of this endeavour – physical relocation and immersion in another culture may not be possible for everyone and even this measure may not ensure ethical translations. While the project of CPT is motivated by a genuine interest in ameliorating cultural understanding at the

69. Dallmayr, *Border Crossings*, 9.

70. Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

level of political theory, it can be difficult to do this in a way that does not reify Western epistemological and ontological categories. Sekyi-Otu differentiates his own project of finding “native universalisms” from the task of CPT, or what he calls cosmopolitanism. He emphasizes:

Cosmopolitanism of a certain kind is indeed a privilege: a privilege in the double sense of being in the first place an option, and, second, a way of being and an ideal available to a special class of social agents in the global community and public sphere.... By contrast, universalism in the vernacular key, be it characteristically metaethical or even substantive, is banal; it costs nothing and yet is inescapable. You need not have lived the cosmopolitan way of life to practice it. Universalism may well be a necessary condition of cosmopolitanism. The reverse is not the case.⁷¹

For Sekyi-Otu, some versions of cosmopolitanism can be an elitist activity reserved for the Western-trained scholar who is able to travel to different countries, immerse herself in its culture, and then communicate her results to a wider audience in academic language. This vantage point of familiarity with different cultures, languages and lands can entail a degree of privilege. This is markedly different from Sekyi-Otu’s conceptualization of universalism, which only requires belonging to a specific culture and the ability to extrapolate from its concrete specificity to transcendent notions. The added step of comparison and cultural translation involved in CPT, or cosmopolitan theory, can serve to limit the vision of transcendental universalisms because, as Chakrabarty implies, clear-cut translations of entire worldviews are rare; most often we are left with “opaque” relationships that resist comparisons.⁷² The task of cultural translating, especially within the framework of Western academia, can highlight the connection between knowledge and power that is an obstacle for postcolonial thinkers.

71. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 78-9.

72. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 17.

Buck-Morss expounds on possible links between Hegelian philosophy and the Haitian revolution that achieved independence for enslaved people against colonial France. In doing so, she is also cognizant of the ways in which Western scholarship frames its relationship with the non-Western world through impositions of sameness or incommensurability. She explains, “Critical theoretical practice today is caught within the prisonhouse of its own academic debates. We are confined within the globally extended theory world, as artists are within the globally incorporated art world.”⁷³ She agrees with the previous thinkers that the narrow scope of Western political theory renders it insufficient as a theoretical tool for understanding different cultures. She also advocates for a nuanced universalism that belies the positions of exaggerated sameness or difference. Buck-Morss summarizes this position as follows: “The politics of scholarship that I am suggesting is neutrality, but not of the nonpartisan, ‘truth lies in the middle’ sort; rather, it is a radical neutrality that insists on the porosity of the space between enemy sides, a space contested and precarious, to be sure, but free enough for the idea of humanity to remain in view.”⁷⁴ She understands the task of cultural translation that is a part of postcolonial research to be a project of mediation between universality and particularity that always leaves a remainder – or a “space” – that must remain contested and ambivalent, and that cannot be subsumed by Western categories. Finally, Mohanty accentuates the gendered implications of Western academic biases against postcolonial research. While thinkers such as Said and Chakrabarty point out Western academic conventions that homogenize the non-West, Mohanty points out that Western feminist scholars are also

73. Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 139.

74. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 150.

complicit in essentializing women in the third world, further imposing Eurocentric thought and policies and perpetuating colonial worldviews. She states:

Western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship - i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience. One such significant effect of the dominant "representations" of Western feminism is its conflation with imperialism in the eyes of particular third world women.⁷⁵

According to Mohanty, assumptions and generalizations about women in the third world, such as their inherent oppression under patriarchy and their lack of agency, misrepresent them and exclude them from feminist scholarship based on colonial stereotypes. Mohanty's important intervention highlights the way that colonialism may be based on cultural oppression, but this racism cannot be separated from sexism – when provincializing the academy, we need to be careful to unravel the different threads of its colonizing project, which impact non-Western researchers in multiple and intersecting ways based on identity.

In this section, I have critiqued the academy based on its internalization of the colonial project in normalizing whiteness and creating both institutional and intellectual obstacles for non-Western scholars and perspectives. Since postcolonial theory originated from historical conditions of colonialism outside the West, it faces unique struggles of challenging racism within Western academic practices and discourse, while being limited to the "master's tools" which are most readily available and encouraged. This is not to say that some kinds of postcolonial theory cannot also be complicit in some academic conventions and biases, but radical versions challenge decolonizing academic discourse and practices. The university tends

75. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 336.

to categorize non-white scholars in tokenistic terms to promote a narrative of tolerance while avoiding genuine decolonization at the level of ideas and culture. Postcolonial thinkers have analyzed intellectual methodologies and concepts that have historically been used to assert Western control and superiority, such as Orientalism, teleology and historicism, all of which have had political impacts. Ethical problems of translation also create barriers for postcolonial research, as demonstrated by the area of comparative political theory. Lastly, academic forms of colonialism can affect women differently; they can be oppressed both through their race and their gender, and these different forms of violence need to be acknowledged and analyzed. The need to decolonize the university is urgent since it is a major centre of reproductions of colonial oppressions; postcolonial thinkers have given thorough analysis to the ways that power and knowledge cannot be separated from each other, and this nexus reiterates historical processes of colonialism. As mentioned earlier, this dissertation will expand possibilities for religious women's agency through a discussion of gendered and cultural universalisms. More than feminist poststructuralism, postcolonial theory has had a convoluted engagement with universalism, partly due to structures of academia that continue to marginalize racial difference and religion. Due to its emergence as a revolutionary and liberatory ideology in colonial struggle, there are counterhegemonic impulses that resist Western colonial and philosophical categorization, and this creates a tension between universalism and particularity in postcolonial theory. Articulating possible theorizations of cultural universalisms, or reconciliations of the particular and universal from a cultural perspective, is essential for expanding notions of religious agency, since Muslim women are marked both through their gender and race. In addressing alternative theoretical frameworks that can reconcile the aforementioned tension, I

will discuss i) Sekyi-Otu's understanding of left universalism, ii) Chakrabarty, Amin and Buck-Morss' conceptualizations of universal history, iii) Walcott and Abdillahi's theorization of Blacklife as a form of universal dialectics. These perspectives will provide alternative ways to conceptualize race and culture both at the level of identity and as part of universal political and theoretical projects.

Left Universalism

As has been gestured to earlier, this dissertation project centers around Sekyi-Otu's concept of left universalism. His unique theoretical approach nuances dominant understandings of culture and challenges us to reconcile particularized conceptions of race with universal ideas. Before I embark on a deeper analysis of left universalism, I will trace its origins to Fanon's work on humanism. As expanded on earlier, the field of postcolonial theory is indebted to Fanon's thought – not only does his incorporation of Marxism with psychoanalytic thought provide theoretical insights into internal forms of colonization, his work on anticolonial struggle sketches a practical basis for liberation and independence. While some postcolonial thinkers prefer a radical particularity as a response to Western impositions of sameness, Fanon prefers to theorize an ideal of universal humanism that is both sensitive to difference, but sufficiently aware of objective norms. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon refers to a “new humanism”⁷⁶ that is borne of decolonization but which must be nurtured beyond a preoccupation with resistance to a critical alignment towards universal ideas. This new humanism “owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the ‘thing’ which has

76. Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 9.

been colonized becomes human during the same process by which it frees itself”⁷⁷ After decolonization, there must be a coming into consciousness by which the decolonized can push beyond the trauma of decolonization to discover their own potential. He explains that “[i]t is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.”⁷⁸ In *Wretched of the Earth*, he urges Africans to do the intellectual work by which they can articulate new horizons: “For ourselves and for humanity, we must turn over a new skin. We must work out new concepts and try to set afoot a new humanity.”⁷⁹ For Fanon, the new humanism must reject the brutality of European humanism; rather, it must start afresh and conceptualize a new basis for the human that is not defined by a defensive particularism or an uncritical universalism. Stefan Kipfer expounds on “Fanon’s life-long search for human-subjective potentials and capacities against the seemingly iron-clad divides of the colonial world and its dehumanizing racialized fixities.”⁸⁰ Through a dialectical process of including both subjective and objective aspects of decolonization, Fanon’s new humanism presents a useful strategy for remedying the violence of colonialism. Kipfer summarizes Fanon’s multi-layered methodology in which “decolonization can only succeed through a *double transformation* of thick subjective and objective realities, a successful challenge to (neo-)colonial rule and a selective restructuring of colonized social formations.”⁸¹ At the level of identity, nation and the

77. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 36-7.

78. Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 231.

79. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 316.

80. Stefan Kipfer, “Fanon for a Post-Imperial World: On Universals and Other Human Matters,” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (East Africa: Daraja Press, 2021), 11.

81. Kipfer, “Fanon for a post-imperial world,” 21-2.

social, the colonized learn to gain confidence and consciousness after the dehumanization of colonialism.

Inspired by Fanon's dialectical approach, Sekyi-Otu builds his theoretical concept of left universalism as a general methodology and philosophy by which cultures can retain their own legacies while pushing for inclusion in universal ideas of the human. This concept of basic humanity, conceived in all its complexity, is at the core of Sekyi-Otu's work and is drawn from Marxian roots. In discussing the dialectical process of fulfilment and recognition Marx describes as inherent in the process of production, Sekyi-Otu believes it prefigures aspects of Fanon's thought and is instructive as a general concept of reconciliation between universalism and particularity. Citing Marx's 1844 work entitled "Comments on James Mill, Elements d'Economie Politique," he says, "After describing in disapproving detail what has been made of the human being as a producing, communicative and affective agent, Marx, in a language that is at once elegiac and exhortative, bears witness to what might have been, an image of human practical activity as the essential matrix of individuation and the ethical relationship."⁸² Sekyi-Otu outlines the way that Marx's analysis of production entails an affirmation of oneself through the objectification of one's individuality, and the satisfaction of having fulfilled another's essential nature through the labour of production. The process of producing a good through one's unexploited labour thus confirms our essential humanity, not just through our subjective self-expression but through the objectification of our labour as creating a human need. This "ethical relationship" described by Sekyi-Otu is a far cry from other philosophical illustrations of mutual recognition, such as Hegel's master-slave dialectic, in which a struggle to the death

82. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 29.

ensues and mutual recognition as equals is not achieved.⁸³ In this model of ethical production, Sekyi-Otu describes the intricate mediation between individual development and communal care: “I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species, and therefore would become recognized and felt by you yourself as a completion of your essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love.”⁸⁴ The model of producing labour in a non-capitalist framework is representative of a general paradigm of mutual recognition and mediation between the subjective and objective. The product created through intentional and equal work “would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature.”⁸⁵ This interpretation of Marx’s “image of human practical activity as the essential matrix of individuation and the ethical relationship” forms the basis of Sekyi-Otu’s concept of left universalism. It also informs his understanding of communism as the goal of postcolonial struggle; communism is not only a political ideology, but a way for postcolonial subjects to overcome both internal and external obstacles for self-realization and justice. Sekyi-Otu iterates, “Communism, then, is a quintessentially ethical undertaking, first because it has for its enabling conditions, principally, conscious choices, decisions, purposes rather than unwilled and determining causes; and second because it has as its aim the realization of an ideal, that of egalitarian justice.”⁸⁶ Both in methodology and the goal of politics, Sekyi-Otu is deeply influenced by Marxist and socialist ideas and this is reflected in the naming of his theory as “left” universalism. While other

83. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Terry P. Pinkard, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Terry P. Pinkard (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), 114-5.

84. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 29.

85. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 29.

86. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 106.

postcolonial thinkers reject what they see as the Eurocentrism of Marxism, he locates concepts within Marxist thought that are universally applicable and ethical and utilizes them for his own methodology.

I have already expounded on the Fanonian and Marxist inspiration behind left universalism. To further explicate on Sekyi-Otu's theory, I examine his stated aims and method. He defines the purpose of his work as follows: "The name of this work is left universalism. Its enabling resources and inciting symbols being at once native particulars and human commonalities, the postcolonial condition – this time and place of radical need – makes reaffirming and reinventing it as the language of radical criticism and vision of regeneration nothing less than imperative."⁸⁷ His juxtaposition of "native particulars" and "human commonalities" is a challenge to current "taboos of our time"⁸⁸ that emphasize incommensurability and a retreat to difference. As mentioned earlier, "strong program" versions of postmodernism and postcolonialism do not provide theoretical tools to engage in normative theory. For Sekyi-Otu, this is not just bad theory, but incognizant of the fact that "indigenous ethical judgments are always already universalizing in their justificatory grounds, inescapably humanist in their critical vocabulary."⁸⁹ What he means is that claims of culture and race can obscure our immersion in the experience of being a human with practical needs and aspirations and the postcolonial legacy of structural oppression necessitates a return to universals. Sekyi-Otu is well-aware of the dangers of generalized theory and is careful to separate his theorizing from the theoretical tools used by colonizers. He insists:

87. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 37.

88. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 4.

89. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 18.

I am willing to describe this as an argument for the transcendental grounding of an ethical and political project, on condition that this is not confused, as it is all too often done, with a transcendental warrant. Transcendental grounding is no more and no less than that project's condition of possibility, generative justification and constraining measure, not a guarantee of its realization and happy consummation.⁹⁰

For Sekyi-Otu, the project of left universalism, grounded in the ethical and political basis of the human, is urgent and necessary; furthermore, it must be carried out so as not to replicate overweening forms of Eurocentric universalisms.

Sekyi-Otu builds the case for a de-emphasis of race in political and normative theorizing. Following Fanon's recommendation for a "new humanism" that can challenge racial demarcations to move forward with nationalist struggles, he believes that a prioritization of race can prevent a focus on other important issues. He says, "'[R]ace' obstructs our perceptual horizon, distracts us from attending to other, foundational questions of human being and social existence, and so we should move on to those other questions, questions we would still have to address were the dominion of racist culture as a world system ever come to a long overdue end. That is to say, move on but without amnesia."⁹¹ This provocative statement to postcolonial thinkers gets to the heart of his critique of current streams of theory that celebrate radical incommensurability or fixate on resistance to the West. The difficult work of internal critique and cultural evolution cannot be displaced after colonization and redirected at reactive or defensive postures. Universalism is not an invention of the West or an imposition of colonization, but "is anterior and transcendent to empire, [and] more primitive and inescapable than the discursive acts and reactions it engendered."⁹² Sekyi-Otu articulates universalism as a

90. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 4.

91. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 6.

92. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 16.

quality of self-reflection and cultural expression and interpretation that is incumbent on everyone, whether colonizer or colonized. His rejoinder to avoid amnesia points to the danger of replicating structures of oppression or a reactionary politics. He reminds postcolonial thinkers that a focus on past wrongs can prevent adequate analysis about present-day problems and creative solutions for the future. Sekyi-Otu affirms, “We have other problems, serious problems, problems carrying essentially unfinished histories; they happen to be human problems, give or take their local stench, also local auguries of redeeming fragrance.”⁹³ The process of building an identity and a nation involves essentially human problems of motivation, organization and liberation; the specific directions and motivations of decolonization may differ, but the overall project can be generalized. Not only is a universalist impetus a pragmatic approach to resolving problems of internal and external independence, it is imperative to reclaiming cultural legacies that have been lost or forgotten in the trauma of colonialism. Sekyi-Otu reiterates, “[T]o abjure universalism tout court because of imperialist, Eurocentric and discriminatory auspices of certain versions – as some Western conscripts to the anti-imperialist cause in common with certain voices from the global South invite us to do – is the last word of the imperial act.”⁹⁴ If colonization is an attempt to eliminate the culture of the colonized, then a rejection of universalism only further fulfills that objective because it denies innate characteristics of culture that have been neglected because of colonialism. Sekyi-Otu urges a conceptual focus beyond issues of race, not to dismiss the violence and destruction of colonialism, but to push beyond the confines of narrow theory that is limited to colonial

93. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 7.

94. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 14.

binaries. Left universalism is a radical alternative to uncritical forms of postcolonialism in viewing universalism not as a European imposition but as a concept that conveys “the ordinary languages of moral and political judgment, to say nothing of vindictory visions of mending the world’s disorder.⁹⁵” This universalism, when used correctly, can be a “particularly powerful weapon of criticism for the oppressed and the excluded.”⁹⁶ According to Sekyi-Otu, issues of race should not be marginalized, but should also not distract from engagement with practical issues of human concern.

Sekyi-Otu’s theory of left universalism is not a simplistic statement of cultural values that correlate to normative ideals. There is an internal dialectical method that carefully reconciles immanent and transcendent elements of thought. There is a subtle yet important difference between taking the basic human as a starting point for transcendental thought and from imposing a universal concept on a particular, although both processes involve the same levels of metaphysical deliberation. Sekyi-Otu declares, “The discursive specimens collected in these essays speak to a universalism that is intracultural in provenance and transcultural in meaning, native in idiom yet always already posing the generic question of the human, impelled by a homemade transcendental requirement of practical reason.”⁹⁷ This eloquent description highlights the way that the human becomes a transcendental standard for gauging cultural issues, whether at the level of the moral or political. If Kant prescribed innate human reason as the basis for transcendental knowledge, Sekyi-Otu grounds his theory in the “ordinary language of moral argument” that is part and parcel of every culture and community. Drawing on Marxist

95. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 14.

96. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 78.

97. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 16.

roots, his transcendentalism is informed by “human practical activity” and is “post-race.”⁹⁸

Gamal Abdel-Shehid comments that, according to left universalism, “Any ethical claims made in a given social setting have to be *both* universalized and made local or partisan,”⁹⁹ but must start from the kernel of the human, which already encompasses universal characteristics. He continues, “[T]he universal can only speak in a language of the particular. But it is our job as political commentators or intellectuals to discern how the universal is being spoken in a particular register.”¹⁰⁰ The theoretical method for social transformation must have sufficient localized contextualization and normative criteria – but it is crucial that objective explanations are rooted in a “native universalism,” and not the other way around. The source for transcendental conceptualizations must be a specific kind of self-understanding, stripped of extraneous trappings of identity (although these are not unimportant). We can compare Sekyi-Otu’s method to the discussion of theory and praxis in Chapter 2 – just as excessive and overweening forms of theory must be constrained by a reconfiguration in practical activities and experiences, left universalism finds its justification in cultural experiences of human fulfilment and recognition. While cosmopolitan thought can require a degree of expertise and privilege, Sekyi-Otu states:

At the heart of such elementary forms of moral discourse is an idea of the human invoked if only in the shape of a rhetorical question or an interrogative proverb, an idea instantiated in the demands and idioms of particular times, places, and agents, and in virtue of which harm and pain and acts of dehumanization can be called by their name,

98. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 5.

99. Gamal Abdel-Shehid, “Introduction,” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (East Africa: Daraja Press, 2021), 2.

100. Abdel-Shehid, “Introduction,” 3.

but also thanks to which determinate prospects for human flourishing can be envisioned in all their local and historical variety.¹⁰¹

According to this definition, anyone is capable of articulating human truths origination from individual cultural experiences. Christopher Balcolm agrees that left universalism “remains adamantly a *foundationalism*, in that its normativity is grounded in an essentially universalizable and transcultural concern with ‘what is good and possible for human *being*’... This is not a prior, formal commitment that operates above local context, but a commitment to locating the transcendental concerns that animate any localized critique.”¹⁰² Enacting left universalism, then, requires a careful method that can perform the two-fold critique of both the specific and the general. This dialectical method can be claimed and utilized by any culture, as Lewis Gordon points out: “Although dialectics tends to be treated as a concept that sprung up willy-nilly from Hegel and then materialized in the thought of Marx, the truth of the matter is that dialectical thinking has been at work on the African continent for millennia.”¹⁰³ Although dialectical thinking has largely been confiscated as the property of academics, Sekyi-Otu shows that it can be found in common understandings as a method of thought and critique. In his book, Sekyi-Otu sketches some specific examples of how this methodology can be utilized.

A consideration of the demanding dialectical requirements of left universalism accentuates the difficulties in postcolonial research that pushes back against European theoretical norms. Accordingly, left universalism is prescriptive and presents an ethical

101. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 80.

102. Christopher Balcolm, “Universalism and immanent critique in ‘The End of Progress and Left Universalism,’” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (East Africa: Daraja Press, 2021), 224.

103. Lewis Gordon, “Afterword,” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (East Africa: Daraja Press, 2021), 258.

commitment to better postcolonial theory. For example, Sekyi-Otu exemplifies cultural prejudices in philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and individualism that can be remediated and improved by different cultural interpretations.¹⁰⁴ Gordon pinpoints the essence of left universalism as epitomizing “humility and a commitment marked by love.”¹⁰⁵ Instead of an abstract theoretical project, he understands left universalism as a requirement of ethical intersubjectivity. Since the act of colonization involves the violence of imposing the colonizer’s self-image onto the colonized, left universalism remediates this basic act of skewed recognition. Gordon explains, “[I]t is possible to love those or that which is not identical to the self. This love, which celebrates the freedom of another to live her, his, or their life, is radical love. It is a love without closure; it is a willingness to serve as a condition of possibility for others’ meaningful and flourishing life. It is, in short, revolutionary love.”¹⁰⁶ The theoretical commitment of left universalism is founded on the kind of generosity and hospitality for the Other that Gordon describes. If left universalism is more a heuristic tool than a concrete method, then its most important requirement appears to be a spirit of love and openness, qualities which are not usually a part of the performance of academic theory, with its stringent criterion of objectivity. Other hurdles in academia that Sekyi-Otu describes are the tendency towards tokenization that can hinder some postcolonial theory. After describing these dominant currents in the academy, he rhetorically asks, “What happens to critique that is not overdetermined by the mandates of antiracism, anti-anti-black-racism, adversary epistemology

104. Ato Sekyi-Otu, “Con-texts of Critique,” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (East Africa: Daraja Press, 2021), 248-9.

105. Gordon, “Afterword,” 262.

106. Gordon, “Afterword,” 262.

and ethics, epistemology and ethics in the service of race work, epistemology and ethics *as* race work: corrective, reparative, vindicationist work, answering back work?”¹⁰⁷ As described earlier, postcolonial scholarship within the structures of Western academia can be overdetermined by hegemonic forms of knowledge which marginalize work on race. Postcolonial scholars can find themselves spending valuable energy and time on preliminary, justificatory work to navigate academic requirements and expectations instead of on radical critiques and resistance. Moreover, Sekyi-Otu is critical of current trends towards forms of postmodernism and poststructuralism that can prevent a focus on normativity or commonalities when theorizing race. Utilizing a left universalist approach requires a careful commitment to sensitive research and a navigation of academic forms of control that can limit some forms of academic work. Nevertheless, Sekyi-Otu’s concept provides a robust theoretical framework for reconciling cultural particularity and universalism, providing an important counter to what I have called strong program versions of postcolonialism.

a) Concrete Universality

Noonan exemplifies Sekyi-Otu’s left universalism through his concept of concrete universality, emphasizing the agency of the oppressed as emblematic of the human language of universals. He explains, “Concrete universality is a matter of the oppressed speaking for themselves, and solidarity a matter of historically privileged supporters learning to listen and speak with, not through or for, oppressed people.”¹⁰⁸ Noonan outlines the Eurocentric vision of

107. Sekyi-Otu, “Con-texts of Critique,” 245.

108. Jeff Noonan, “Speaking for, speaking through, speaking with: Abstract and concrete universality in the struggle for human emancipation,” in *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu*, eds. Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori (East Africa: Daraja Press, 2021), 120.

humanism that has dominated as an abstract universal and that is often imposed upon other cultures who are assumed incapable of voicing their own needs. He agrees with Sekyi-Otu that the historical use of humanism as an imperial tool does not justify its rejection, but its reinvention as a heuristic tool to “understand singularities as concrete universals.”¹⁰⁹ Citing Hegel’s dialectical process of enacting a philosophy which “does not study *inessential* determinations but only those that are essential. The abstract or the non-actual is not its element and content; rather, its element and content is the *actual*, what is self-positing, what is alive within itself,”¹¹⁰ Noonan describes a dialectical process of understanding culture through a reconciliation of general and particular dimensions. Even though Hegel himself did not follow through with this definition of philosophy as the unfolding of a singular idea in different locations and times (the example of Haiti will be discussed shortly), his dialectical method is useful for enabling oppressed peoples to grasp universals in their experiences of injustice. Noonan agrees that “[b]y understanding the concrete universal as the outcome of a dialectical historical process, the exclusionary and oppressive use of abstract universals can be avoided and the liberatory value of concretely universal human values become clear.”¹¹¹ Just as Sekyi-Otu rooted his concept of left universalism in the idea of the human and its basic material needs, Noonan agrees that “concretely universal human values” are accessible by anyone in any culture, especially when their humanity is denied through structures of oppression. Since all humans need shelter, food, clothing, and the capacity to think and love, the denial of these will inevitably lead to an awareness of this lack and a demand for the recognition of their full

109. Noonan, “Concrete universality,” 120.

110. Hegel, “Phenomenology,” 47.

111. Noonan, “Concrete universality,” 122.

humanity. Noonan adapts the concept of humanism as an abstract universal to a definition that can allow for these nuances: “Humanism is therefore not a relic of a Eurocentric past. It is a reality being created every time real human beings free themselves from conditions in which their self-creative capacities have been buried under the weight of objectifying, dominating social circumstances.”¹¹² If every human is capable of articulating these concrete universals, then this speaks back to abstract notions of Western universalism as rooted in particular (Western) cultures and histories. Noonan reminds us that the West, as well, is a particular culture claiming to represent all cultures.

Noonan sets out specific guidelines by which concrete universality can be conceptualized and used as a mechanism of alleviating group oppression. These groups must encounter favourable circumstances in which to articulate their demands, they must develop the consciousness necessary to make their voices heard, and they must be authentic spokespersons from their particular cultures and communities. The economic and political systems and cultural ideology must allow for oppressed peoples to take what they need in order to fulfill their humanity. Noonan explains these institutional criteria as follows:

[T]he economic system which produces the goods that people need must be made to work for the sake of satisfying everyone’s needs within the known limits of the natural environment. Second, the political system must ensure that everyone has the voice and power to meaningfully participate in the debates and institutions that produce the laws and policies that structure collective life. Finally, the ruling value system and major social institutions must enable each person to explore and express themselves through forms of work, activity, belief, and relationship which are individually meaningful and socially valuable and valued.¹¹³

112. Noonan, “Concrete universality,” 128.

113. Noonan, “Concrete universality,” 132-3.

It is significant that Noonan builds concrete universality not only on theoretical conceptualizations but in the social, economic and political conditions that would allow for these abstract ideas to take hold and flourish. Since his, and Sekyi-Otu's understanding of universality, are built on material human needs, practical conditions for improvement of society must be present for oppressed people to assert themselves. The importance of cultural values and social institutions that enable exploration and expression is paramount as the oppressed need to have the freedom and time to develop their subjectivity. Often, it is in the very experience of harm that these groups are able to recognize their limits and enunciate a desire for change. Noonan explains, "It does not take sophisticated scientific understanding to diagnose exploitative, oppressive, and alienating conditions, because they are always imprinted and expressed on the faces and bodies of those whose lives are damaged by them."¹¹⁴ Both Sekyi-Otu and Noonan illustrate that the "underlying universal grammar of ethical judgment" is not a Western sensibility speaking through different cultural registers, but its own expression of wrongdoing and indignation based on human moral capacities. It is only through this process of self-consciousness that the universal grammar can be realized and enacted, with the right enabling conditions mentioned earlier. As Noonan states, "When everyone can speak and participate, harms are known, institutions forced to acknowledge them, and changes forced through by the collective agency of the historically oppressed groups expressing human demands through acting in their own name."¹¹⁵ Each culture follows its own trajectory of "progress;" this is a good rejoinder against universal teleologies that presuppose that all

114. Noonan, "Concrete universality," 131.

115. Noonan, "Concrete universality," 130.

peoples must modernize at the same pace and following the same stages. The phenomenological experience of oppression necessitates its own overcoming through universal ethical registers, and different social and historical contexts can dramatically influence these experiences. Because of this need for change to come through the voices and actions of those who are wronged, it is imperative that only those who belong to specific cultures profess to be their spokespersons. Noonan cautions, “No one from outside a given community, who does not know its traditions intimately, does not speak its language, does not understand the way it *feels* to be a member of that community, can pronounce on whether and to what extent the recovery of traditional life-ways are essential to the process of liberation.”¹¹⁶ While this requirement follows logically from the development of self-consciousness in the oppressed, it does raise some questions for the feasibility of cultural analysis and critique. If only “authentic” members of a community can represent it, how does this bode for academics who wish to study other cultures – does birth and origin preclude the ability to do ethical examinations of other societies? Many anthropologists and archeologists would disagree with this stringent requirement, especially as globalization has further eroded unitary social identities as cultures overlap. This brings to mind Godrej’s reflections on the possibility of ethical cosmopolitan theory. Nevertheless, Noonan’s specific examination of concrete universality as an organic process of self-realization and overcoming for the oppressed builds on Sekyi-Otu’s theorization of left universalism. Noonan’s analysis of what the process of achieving self-consciousness and the conditions it requires is a good concretization of how the universal can speak in native registers.

116. Noonan, “Concrete universality,” 137.

Universalizing History

Another intervention into uncritical forms of cultural universalisms is the re-envisioning of history through as a process of intercultural dialogue and collaboration instead of linear Eurocentric conceptions. Chakrabarty, Amin and Buck-Morss provide critiques of dominant modes of Western historicizing and provide alternative conceptualizations that do not focus on cultural particularity as opposed to Western universalism. A rewriting of history is crucial to rescue lost cultural narratives that have been subsumed under accounts that attempt to dilute complex historical processes. Chakrabarty interrogates the “‘political’ need to think in terms of totalities” and seeks to “[unsettle] totalizing thought by putting into play nontotalizing categories.”¹¹⁷ He critiques the current intellectual practice of historicism that models itself on linear political models of power; but political narratives do not always incorporate the richness of history. Indeed, it is often the winners of political conflicts that get to “write” history in their favour, but reducing the past to a realist, winner-takes-all narrative flattens counternarratives and resistance – which have historically been the lot of non-Westerners. Instead of this totalizing form of historicism, Chakrabarty proposes a dialectical model which intertwines history’s formal teleological project with another simultaneous process of development that can take on various shapes and forms. He states:

“[H]istoricism” is a mode of thinking with the following characteristics. It tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first, as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity at least in potentia—and, second, as something that develops over time. Historicism typically can allow for complexities and zigzags in this development; it seeks to find the general in the particular, and it does not entail any necessary assumptions of teleology.

117. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 21-2.

But the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to this understanding.¹¹⁸

A remediated version of historicism contains both a unified structure and contingent basis; the general is formed by the kernel of the particular, and not vice versa. This ensures a historical narrative that is sensitive to cultural contexts and the fluidity that is entailed by a focus on particulars; this nuanced component of historicism can challenge teleological accounts that gloss over differences in favour of unity. Chakrabarty states, “Ideas, old and new, about discontinuities, ruptures, and shifts in the historical process have from time to time challenged the dominance of historicism, but much written history still remains deeply historicist. That is to say, it still takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time.”¹¹⁹ His theorization of historicism as a two-tiered system challenges dominant Western historical narratives, but the process of replacing powerful theories remains an ongoing struggle. Chakrabarty details different Western ideologies that he believes conform to the unitary understanding of history – such as liberalism and classical Marxism, which can explain processes of history such as capitalism and industrialization in Eurocentric ways. He gives the example of the “European intellectual tradition” that has significant prestige, but which can be shown to rest on historical fallacies.¹²⁰

In his book *Eurocentrism*, Amin deftly and thoroughly examines Western historical traditions and lays bare the way that unitary impulses in historicizing can occlude

118. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 22-3.

119. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 23.

120. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 5.

“inconvenient” facts. He describes the construction of the myth of European progress as a unique and superior civilization:

This dominant culture invented an eternal West, unique since the moment of its origin. This arbitrary and mythic construct had as its counterpart an equally artificial conception of the Other (the Orient), likewise constructed on mythic foundations. The product of this Eurocentric vision is the well-known version of Western history—a progression from Ancient Greece to Rome to feudal Christian Europe to capitalist Europe—one of the most popular of received ideas.¹²¹

This trajectory of Western civilization from ancient Greece to today is reiterated constantly in academic textbooks and lectures. For example, the origins of Western democracy are usually traced to Athens and direct democracy. David Held is one influential political theorist who outlines different streams of thought in the progression of Western political thought – developmental forms of democracy find their origin in Athens while protective democratic norms were first found in republican Rome.¹²² The construction of an “eternal West” with a clear, unbroken foundation in Greece obscures actual historical development, which included intercultural scholarship and dialogue. Amin points out that this myth has involved the circulation of other partial truths in its service; it removes Greece from its historical roots in the Orient through the creation of a false European cultural unity that is achieved through racist homogenizations of culture, language and religion. He iterates that “Eurocentrism is not, properly speaking, a social theory, which integrates various elements into a global and coherent vision of society and history. It is rather a prejudice that distorts social theories. It draws from its storehouse of components, retaining one or rejecting another according to the ideological

121. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. Russell Moore and James Membrez (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 165-6.

122. David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 11-28.

needs of the moment.”¹²³ Just as Said’s Orientalism is not a political ideology, but lurks underneath formal theoretical motivations and declarations, Eurocentrism is also bias that is implicitly prevalent beneath political and historical narratives. Eurocentrism utilizes various weapons from its arsenal of racial prejudices and stereotypes for justification. While Orientalism was based in discourse analysis, Amin’s critique of Eurocentrism incorporates material conditions and historical and cultural analysis. As mentioned earlier, he envisions an expanded Marxist approach that gives an account of dependency in the international economy based in legacies of colonialism and capitalist exploitation of the periphery by the core. His critique of Eurocentrism also differs from Orientalism in its urging of universalism – while Said showcased the predominance of Orientalism in culture, he largely remained within its binary and failed to provide an alternative theorization outside of its confines. Amin pushes us to create an intellectual climate without cultural divisions, in which critique takes a central place as a method of inquiry. He declares, “The universal right to analyze and critique entails dangers, to be sure, whose risk must nevertheless be assumed. There is the danger of being mistaken, due to ignorance or conceptual shortcomings.... If the goal is to advance the project of universalism, this risk must be accepted.”¹²⁴ Eurocentrism, for Amin, is an intellectual bias that has encompassed various domains and that continues to present a one-dimensional view of history. If we are to push beyond this bias, we must reach beyond binaries and essentialized views of culture, through both immanent and transcendent critique.

123.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 166.

124.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 176.

According to Amin, there are several ways that the European intellectual trajectory justifies itself. From a cultural perspective, tracing Western ancestry to ancient Greece allows a direct connection to philosophical ideas of rationality that emerged during that period. As Amin points out:

The myth of Greek ancestry performs an essential function in the Eurocentric construct. It is an emotional claim, artificially constructed in order to evade the real question—why capitalism appeared in Europe before it did elsewhere—by replacing it, amidst a panoply of false answers, with the idea that the Greek heritage predisposed Europe to rationality. In this myth, Greece was the mother of rational philosophy, while the Orient never succeeded in going beyond metaphysics.¹²⁵

While this logic situates Europe as the inheritor of Greek philosophy, it does not consider glaring omissions in history, such as the two thousand years between ancient philosophy and its emergence in ideas of the Renaissance. The “Dark Ages” in Western thought correlate to the “Golden Era” in Islamic thought, in which Islamic philosophers worked to translate and reinvigorate the ideas of Plato and Aristotle for an Islamic populace. For example, the philosopher Al-Kindi proposed an epistemology of Platonic realism, and used Greek ideas freely in his work, not seeing them as incompatible with a religious framework.¹²⁶ Ibn Rushd is another Islamic philosopher who translated works of Plato and Aristotle and expanded on their theorizations.¹²⁷ These invaluable contributions to philosophy are dismissed because they do not conform to the lineage of a superior Western civilization. As Amin comments, “Arab-Islamic philosophy is treated in this account as if it had no other function than to transmit the Greek heritage to the Renaissance world. Moreover, Islam, in this dominant vision, could not have

125. Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 166-7.

126. Al-Kindi and Alfred L. Ivry. *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics; a Translation of Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi's Treatise "on First Philosophy" (fi Al-Falsafah Alula)*, 1st ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974).

127. Averroes (Ibn Rushd), and Ralph. Lerner. *Averroes on Plato's Republic*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

gone beyond the Hellenic heritage; even if it had attempted to do so, it would have failed badly.”¹²⁸ A cultural racism drives this intellectual justification of the so-called history of Western philosophy. A closer examination of Greek thought shows that these thinkers viewed themselves as part of the ancient Orient, acknowledging knowledge that had been gained from this tradition. As a result, they did not carry derogatory views about the Orient. Martin Bernal analyzes racist interpretations of the Orient, or the Muslim world, that were common during the Romantic period, referring to this cultural depiction as “Hellenomania”¹²⁹ The false Western narrative that traces its origins to Greek heritage legitimizes a historical trajectory in which white, European men epitomize a higher level of civilization and intellectual advancement than the Orient, or the rest of the world. Amin, using Bernal’s analysis, outlines the way that overlaps in language between the Greeks and Egyptians also had to be glossed over and reconstructed to support the myth of Western Greek heritage. He shows, “up to half of the Greek language was borrowed from the Egyptian and the Phoenician tongues. But linguistics invented a mysterious ‘Proto-Aryan’ language to take the place of this borrowing, thereby safeguarding a myth dear to Eurocentrism, that of the ‘Aryan purity’ of Greece.”¹³⁰ “Dubious acrobatics” ensured that Greek language was insulated from its Oriental heritage, and a “pure” version was connected with European languages.¹³¹ Moreover, the explicit scientific racism that was used to justify cultural inferiority for Orientals was reflected in the separation of language as well. Since linguistics was also an emerging science, it purported to explain cultural

128.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 167.

129.Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol. 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

130.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 168.

131.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 168.

characteristics through the characteristics of language. For example, Indo-European languages were perceived to contain inherent tendencies towards liberty and logic, while Semitic languages (Hebrew and Arabic) reflected a servile and lazy demeanour.¹³² The inner excellence of European language was believed to directly contribute to its philosophical rigour and intellectual progress. Lastly, critique of Oriental religion and the superiority of Christianity was used to further concretize the myth of Greek lineage. A new sense of European nationalism after the second world war and a decline in the respectability of genetic racism called for a renewed sense of identity, and Christianity provided an amenable cultural capital. Amin explains the conundrum of trying to align Christianity with Western geographic areas and sensibilities while its origins can be traced to the Orient: “[I]n order for Christianity to become the foundation of European identity, a sweeping, totalizing and historical interpretation had to be developed, stressing its alleged timeless characteristics and opposing it to other religions and philosophies.”¹³³ As a result, Muslims were endowed with characteristics ranging from hypersexuality to repressed sexuality, according to the taboos of the day¹³⁴ and Christians were described as innately temperate and intellectual. To complete this mythical trajectory, non-Christians in ancient Greece were also contrasted with individuals in other parts of the Orient, while they were linked culturally and religiously with the “still barbaric Europeans.”¹³⁵ Even today, Jesus Christ and his family are most often depicted as blonde-haired to reiterate the narrative that Christianity was always a property of the West.¹³⁶ Amin compares the

132.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 170.

133.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 173.

134.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 170.

135.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 173.

136.Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 174.

essentialized and rigid form of Christianity with forms of religious fundamentalisms¹³⁷ and points out that the appropriation of the Christian faith paved the way for further European stages, such as that of capitalism.¹³⁸ Amin's explication of the elaborate fabrications needed to prop up Eurocentrism, from cultural to linguistic to religious justifications, highlights the fallacious nature of historical narratives that focus on parochial views of culture. Amin's rejoinder to critique ruthlessly, whether our own culture or others, is integral to his view of universal history so that we do not replicate false narratives that distort complex cultural interactions and dialogue.

In *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*, Buck-Morss tackles issues of historical bias and Eurocentrism through a novel analysis of the slave revolution in Haiti during the time that Hegel wrote about the master-slave conflict. Using evidence from documents of the time, she shows that the Haitian revolution best epitomized the impulse towards universal freedom expressed by the French Revolution and influenced the direction of European politics. Yet, there is no mention in the Western canon of Haiti's contribution to philosophical ideas. For Buck-Morss, this glaring omission in representations of Western political and theoretical development demands a different conceptualization of universal history. She writes:

To evoke the specter of Eurocentrism at this point is easy, of course, but it begs the question of how Eurocentrism itself was constructed historically, and what role Haiti might have played in that process. Shifts in historical interpretation are not the invention of one person. The work of unrelated scholars builds upon each other.... [I]t is possible to locate the holes in our knowledge that more careless research would have obscured. These holes reveal the fragments of another story behind the official one.... The Haitian Revolution lies at the crossroads of multiple discourses as a defining moment in world history.¹³⁹

137. Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 173.

138. Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 174.

139. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 13.

Buck-Morss agrees with Chakrabarty and Amin that Eurocentrism is vested in particular accounts of history that demarcate between cultures and in which the dominant perspective obfuscates non-Western perspectives. The case of the Haitian revolution highlights an important blind spot in Western history and excavating the “holes in our knowledge” it reveals can shed light on problematic forms of historicizing. It is important to engage in this work of uncovering omissions in historical narratives not just for accurate representations of the past, but to ensure universal ideas for the future. She calls for “rescuing the idea of universal human history from the uses to which white domination has put it” and urges a radical re-conceptualization of history: “If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis.”¹⁴⁰ Similar to Sekyi-Otu’s vantage point of left universalism, Buck-Morss desires to excavate ideas of universal freedom from their Western stronghold and make them available as conceptual tools for any culture, through reconstitution and reimagining. To enact this vision of universal freedom, the method and subject of historicizing must be reworked. She declares, “Because the central question of history’s meaning cannot be asked outside of time but only in the thick of human action, the way the question is posed, the methods of the inquiry, and the criteria of what counts as a legitimate answer all have political implications.”¹⁴¹ Because historical narratives carry theoretical and political import, it is imperative to conceive of history through methods that avoid cultural assumptions and impositions. Buck-Morss continues to

140. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 74-5.

141. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 109.

interrogate how dominant forms of constructing history have sidelined certain subjects while assuming others as the agents of history. She asks:

Who or what is the collective subject of history? Is it the nation? Civilization? Class? Is it Hegel's cunning actor, Reason? Each of these categories of comprehension, while determining present phenomena as meaningful, comes to us full of residues of the past, containing the sedimented history of utopian dreams and cultural blind spots, political struggles and power effects. Historically inherited concepts form the collective consciousness of actors who, in turn, create history. Paradoxically, even when collective actors proclaim themselves as the standard-bearers for universal history – indeed, especially when they make this avant-gardist claim – they establish their identity in contrast to others, to outsiders.¹⁴²

Buck-Morss analysis of the events of the Haitian revolution accentuate the claim that history is always written by the winners – instead of an acknowledgement of universal ideas through “historically inherited concepts from the collective consciousness of actors,” they are often formed through antagonistic relations with an Other of history. She wonders if it is possible to re-envision a universal history in which ordinary humans are not instrumentalized for dominant conceptual ideas, and “collective subjectivity” can take center stage in accounts of universal history.¹⁴³ One is reminded of Levinas' critique of history as exemplifying the violence of “totality” that is a characteristic of Western philosophy. In this totality, “[i]ndividuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning.”¹⁴⁴ For Levinas, the totality that predetermines individuals in “plastic forms of the

142. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 110.

143. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 111.

144. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 21-2.

epic”¹⁴⁵ voids the ethical relation that should exist between Self and Other. Both Buck-Morss and Levinas call for a subjective basis for history that is sensitive to difference and does not reify the Other as a mere reflection of the Self. Buck-Morss reflects on the work that remains to be done for transformative versions of universal history to emerge: “Universal history engages in a double liberation, of the historical phenomena and of our own imagination: by liberating the past we liberate ourselves. The limits to our imagination need to be taken down brick by brick, chipping away at the cultural embeddedness that predetermines the meaning of the past in ways that hold us captive in the present.”¹⁴⁶ Rather than in the sphere of political events, the rewriting of universal history retains more urgency at the level of the imagination, in ethical relations and intercultural collaboration. But since history is imbricated with politics and power, this project requires patience and self-critique during the process of “chipping away” at cultural biases.

Buck-Morss’ theorization of universal history involves a dialectical treatment of both the past, and the method of historicizing that will build better historical narratives for the future. Expanding on the former kind of dialectic, Buck-Morss details the importance of recovering cultural “artefacts” from the past and putting them in their rightful place. She is cognizant that this is not simply a process of empirical recovery, but that numerous structures of power dissuade the recognition that our current intellectual progress is indebtedness to various cultural legacies. She says:

Between uniformity and determinacy of historical meaning, there is a dialectical encounter with the past. In extending the boundaries of our moral imagination, we need to see a historical space before we can explore it. The mutual recognition between past

145. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.

146. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 149.

and present that can liberate us from the recurring cycle of victim and aggressor can occur only if the past to be recognized is on the historical map. It is in the picture, even if it is not in place. Its liberation is a task of excavation that takes place not across national boundaries, but without them. Its richest finds are at the edge of culture. Universal humanity is visible at the edges.¹⁴⁷

She urges academics to engage in this project of excavation, so that portions of the past may be situated in their proper place instead of being relegated to the edges of narratives of universal history and humanity. This task will involve a form of self-reflection and acknowledgement of cultural coherence instead of fragmentation; it will be a “struggle to liberate the past from within the unconscious of a collective that forgets the conditions of its own existence.”¹⁴⁸ Aside from the retroactive process of rewriting different cultural contributions into history, Buck-Morss also provides a foundation or method for dialectically understanding history through reconciliation between particular and universal dimensions. Terming this method a “new humanism” following Fanon, her book “works through the historical specificities of particular experiences, approaching the universals not by subsuming facts within overarching systems or homogenizing premises, but by attending to the edges of systems, the limits of premises, the boundaries of our historical imagination in order to trespass, trouble, and tear these boundaries down.”¹⁴⁹ This method of historicizing can ensure that the universal history of the *future* is more rigorous and accurate, through an appreciation of the general *and* specific components of events. For example, Buck-Morss’ analysis of the Haitian revolution pinpoints moments of universal relevance within the experiences of the slaves that would impact the direction of the French Revolution and political theory. She delineates, “Universality is in the

147. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 150-1.

148. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 85.

149. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 79.

moment of the slaves' self-awareness that the situation was not humanly tolerable, that it marked the betrayal of civilization and the limits of cultural understanding, the nonrational, and nonrationalizable course of human history that outstrips in its *inhumanity* anything that a cultural outlaw could devise."¹⁵⁰ The moment of realization that shone forth during this experience of inhumanity sparked a fervour to revolt and redefine the essence of universal humanity. Although Sekyi-Otu is critical of Buck-Morss' anchoring of universalism as "contingent disclosure or historical epiphany,"¹⁵¹ I believe it carries weight as a method of re-enacting universal history, or distinguishing moments in the past that can help uncover different marginalized narratives. Buck-Morss is aware of the dangers of a dialectical approach to writing history because renewed self-awareness must lead to action, which in the moment carries uncertainty and even brings violence and brutality. Another limitation to this method of conducting historical review is that it does not follow a linear trajectory and demands sensitivity to complexity. She explains, "There is no end to this project, only an infinity of connecting links. And if these are to be connected without domination, then the links will be lateral, additive, syncretic rather than synthetic."¹⁵² Yet she believes the difficulties of uncertainty inherent in the task of universal history are a small price to pay for a robust method of historicizing that can contain difference without needing to subsume it under abstract and generalized narratives. Chakrabarty, Amin and Buck-Morss all highlight the problems inherent in current conceptions of history and seek to interrogate it with dialectical approaches that can reconcile both universal and particular aspects of culture.

150. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 133-4 (original italics).

151. Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, 31.

152. Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti*, 151.

BlackLife as Universalizing Race

BlackLife is a dynamic conceptualization of race as inextricably intertwined within structures of capitalism and modernity.¹⁵³ Abdillahi and Walcott strive to ground their theory within the specificity of Black lives, while showcasing how these lives have been produced through universal processes of displacement and violence. As such, I situate BlackLife alongside left universalism and universal history as a useful theoretical tool for reconciling the specificity of racial identity with political, economic and philosophical structures. While some versions of postcolonialism emphasize constructions of race and culture to counter colonial legacies, BlackLife is not a retreat to difference but a bold theory that historicizes and understands capitalism and modernity through the lens of Blackness, showing that culture and race cannot be isolated from universal processes. While left universalism and universal history remained at the theoretical level, Abdillahi and Walcott ground their dialectical process in concrete effects of state structure and policies such as incarceration and migration. Through this mitigation of theory with the political, they critique academic analyses of Black culture for its elitism and parochialism when it comes to effecting practical change. In explaining their rationale for Blacklife, they state, “We have made BlackLife one word because we believe that living Black makes BlackLife inextricable from the mark of its flesh, both historically and in our current time. The mark of Black flesh is the foundation from which BlackLife in all of its multiplicities, varieties, potentialities and possibilities proceeds from and is therefore intimately entangled.”¹⁵⁴ It is

153. Idil Abdillahi and Rinaldo Walcott, *BlackLife: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Freedom* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2019).

154. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 9.

significant that their concept finds its foundation inscribed in Black bodies themselves, away from the abstracting effects of generalized theory.

Abdillahi and Walcott explain the universal conceptualization of race that continues to dominate Western theory:

[T]he foundational premise of Euro-political religio-philosophical orientation, which understands the human as a category always already gendered as man, raced as white and sexualized as heterosexual and never Black. This reigning conception of man-human has been at the root of post-1492 conceptions of community, in which philoso-political struggles of various kinds—anticolonial, feminists, gay and lesbian and anti-racist have demanded and to some measure forced revisions of the man-human conception, demonstrating its flexibility by adding to it and elaborating it, but not changing in any radical sense its foundational claim as the only way of conceiving of human life.¹⁵⁵

Hegemonic ideas of the superiority of whiteness continue to dominate our intellectual horizons.

What these ideas occlude are the specific processes of colonization, slavery and economic exploitation of Blacks that have been integral to the construction of white progress. If Black bodies were constitutive of capitalist accumulation, then “BlackLife remains perpetually unacknowledged as always complicating capital in ways that we have yet to fully grapple with beyond those of the Black radical tradition.”¹⁵⁶ The authors note that Foucault does not engage in an analysis of slavery in his critique of power in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (although he does discuss race elsewhere). Abdillahi and Walcott emphasize “[t]hat we might read the plantation as a technology of the modern, in which the practices of power, its internalized disciplinary modes, its internalized dynamics of conduct of the self and a perverted juridical and scientization become evident and are indeed the foundations of the modern and

155. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 24.

156. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 6.

late modern penal state is not lost on anyone interested in Black global cultures.”¹⁵⁷ They view slavery as a fundamental prototype and progenitor of the disciplinary modern state system and believe that Black lives have been systematically sidelined from historical and theoretical contexts. The authors explain that “[a]s both the engines and the disposable excess of early and late industrial capitalism and modernity, Black people and coloured bodies have a particular and specific mark within the contexts of global relations.”¹⁵⁸ Acknowledging that Black and coloured bodies have formed the backbone of generalized accounts of White civilization and thought reminds us that purist conceptions of universalism are already embedded with cultural particularity. Yet this heterogeneity is not represented in academic narratives, in which “these diasporas are the B-side of globalization discourses.”¹⁵⁹ Abdillahi and Walcott explain, “To put it crudely, white folks do globalization and folks of colour do diaspora or white folks invoke the global as a necessary good, forgetting how much of it is undergirded by brutal forms of violence and death – Black death.”¹⁶⁰ The academy reproduces these accounts of generalized theories articulated through the West while conveniently neglecting the exploitation of non-Whites that forms the underbelly of universalism. To push back against overly academic conceptualizations of capitalism and modernity, Abdillahi prioritizes “forms of interpersonal subjective knowledge that academic theory cannot address,”¹⁶¹ including literature, public policy and music. While cognizant of her role as an academic, she desires to “bring all of the ideas and reflections that academic tools can bring, in order to serve back to the lives and perspectives of Black women,

157. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 42.

158. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 25.

159. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 25.

160. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 25.

161. Idil Abdillahi, *Black Women Under State: Surveillance, Poverty & The Violence of Social Assistance* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2022), 176.

rather than to serve back to the academy.”¹⁶² This thoughtful statement harks back to critiques of academic elitism and misrepresentations of marginalized populations in Chapter 2. Academic analysis must be grounded in praxis or risk being irrelevant or even dangerous. For Abdillahi and Walcott, their move to praxis is based in what they call the “Black Test”:

The Black Test simply suggests that any policy that does not meet the requirement of ameliorating the dire conditions of Black people’s lives is not a policy worth having. This proposal is a challenge to rethink the very grounds of a desired national and global transformative change – where it begins and where it ends. The Black Test is a proposal and a provocation to those committed to modernity’s ideals to notice and to urgently act on how encounters with BlackLife always seem to reveal the limits of their policy imaginations. The Black Test requires us to think another and different world now. We believe that an ethical politics of life demands a radical approach to dissolving inequality or at the least radically ameliorating it.¹⁶³

In this eloquent statement, the authors reiterate that policy, and the theory behind it, must serve those it represents and not the other way around – if universal theories, with their historical amnesia, occlude the contribution of Black lives to historical processes of capitalism, politics and modernity, then they have failed. The Black Test is a simple and grounding theoretical experiment to ensure that generalized theory is legitimized in praxis and accountable to those it purports to speak for. It is a sobering reminder for academics that their work must aim to improve the lives of citizens and be anchored in remediating everyday inequalities. After discussing the largely theoretical interventions of left universalism and universal history, Walcott and Abdillahi’s rejoinders towards a theory rooted in praxis are a welcome reminder of the stakes of theory and its responsibility towards ethical research and representation. BlackLife gestures towards a reconciliation of abstract cultural universalisms

162. Abdillahi, *Black Women*, 34.

163. Abdillahi and Walcott, *BlackLife*, 91-2.

with particular conceptions of race – namely, the way that racialized bodies have always been a part of universal processes.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the genealogy of the field of postcolonialism to conceptualize theoretical tools that can help expand the possibilities for pious religious agency. If these women are defined by their gendered and racialized difference, then an attempt to open up these categories will involve the intellectual fields that dedicate themselves to spheres of difference – namely, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Postcolonialism emerged as a radical, counterhegemonic force against Western imperialism, and this continues to structure its approach today. Various theoretical strands of postcolonial theory emphasize different goals but remain united in their aversion to universalisms that impose internal or external controls on the colonized. While some versions of postcolonial theory are amenable to examinations of structures, many are critiqued for promoting cultural essentialisms over strategies of collective mobilization. The academy is deeply imbricated in the project of colonialism, through the creation of institutional and intellectual hurdles for non-Western scholars and perspectives. Since it is a major center for the reproduction of colonial ideas, and reifies the problematic nexus between power and knowledge, the academy must be decolonized to encourage critical postcolonial research. This project positions itself as outside of conventional intellectual trends by seeking to reconcile particular and universal conceptualizations of culture. I address alternative theoretical frameworks as presented by Sekyi-Otu's left universalism (and illustrated by Noonan's concrete universalism), Chakrabarty and Buck-Morss' understanding of universal history and Abdillahi and Walcott's theorization of Blacklife. By expounding on culture as a

dialectical category connecting both specific identities and generalized collective understandings, we can avoid binary constructions and push for more nuanced theorizations of culture. In the next chapter, I will utilize the conceptual tools available through the different dialectical understandings of gender and culture to showcase a more multidimensional and relational feminist agency for religious women, as well as situate the dissertation in a feminist methodology.

Chapter 5 - Expanding Religious Agency: Towards a Universalism with a Difference

In this chapter, I will tie together the various problematics and themes sketched in the previous chapters to put forward the theoretical foundation for an expanded conceptualization of religious agency. I will begin by situating the project within feminist epistemology, methodology, method and ethics. Ultimately, this is a feminist project – while I utilize various theoretical frameworks, such as secularism, religion, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, these are all subservient to the feminist project of articulating the complexities of women’s agency, whether religious or not. A feminist methodology highlights the precarity of knowledge production in a masculine academy, emphasizing praxis, ethical engagement and the importance of centring women’s experience and material circumstances as opposed to “objective” research. I will continue by tying together the different conceptual threads of this dissertation through a concise articulation of expanded religious agency. The topic of women’s agency is embattled terrain; from male philosophers musing about whether women were rational enough to partake in politics to more current debates about women’s abortion rights, it seems that debates about women’s agency and choice continue to be controversial. By interrogating the current academic literature on religious women’s agency, I show that, while a focus on a unique religious subjectivity is important in critiquing liberal ideas of agency as exclusively resistant, implying that religious agency is limited to pious agency can serve to a) reiterate and reinscribe the secular binary in which religion is necessarily irrational and oppressive, and b) essentialize religious women as pious individuals instead of complex, multi-faceted beings. I utilize the invaluable contributions of the existing literature in opening up domain for discussion of religious agency, while pushing beyond a one-dimensional view of

religious agency that can easily be used to strengthen both Islamophobic and Eurocentric views on Muslim women, as well as patriarchal version of Islam imposed on women. Through reconciling elements of sameness and difference within poststructural and postcolonial theories, I assert a feminist heuristic that can push the literature on religious agency towards creative engagements with universalism. A philosophical examination of this literature as well as an analysis at the level of subjectivity will show its limitations in addressing women's full political agency, as well as their multidimensional and relational selfhood. By addressing both the formal political sphere as well as feminist capability and consciousness, I make a substantial intervention into pious agency, which is confined to the ethical space within religious communities, and which essentializes these women's identities and potential. Agency is both transformational at the level of politics and deeply personal. To this end, I propose that we expand pious agency as a feminist category to explicate the full range of complexity and potential that religious agency can entail.

A Feminist Methodology?

I have thus far avoided structuring the dissertation into an explicit methodology; instead, I have let the ideas speak for themselves, building my overall theoretical argument about religious agency. But there has been an implicit methodology undergirding the project, and this will be explained explicitly now while bringing together the conceptual arguments that have been presented. As Shulamit Reinharz explains, since feminism itself is not a coherent theoretical lens, it utilizes a variety of methods.¹ The goal, then, is not to make feminist

1. Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 243.

research fit into a specific methodology, but to utilize methods in the service of feminist goals and praxis. Indeed, one of the critiques of traditional epistemology that feminists seek to overturn is a positivist approach that demands objectivity as the defining criteria for research instead of situating women's own experiences at the centre of analysis.² As eminent women thinkers have pointed out, it is futile to utilize methods that have traditionally been used to deny women intellectual authority to create new spaces for women in academia. These theorists interrogate the privileged white male perspective in theory and justify a new methodology that can do justice to women's unique experiences and perspectives.³ Therefore, it is paramount for feminists to find amenable methodological frameworks to support their intellectual and political projects, instead of feeling obligated to make their work fit into predetermined criteria. Reinharz explains that feminist researchers can use various strategies to make their research legible within academic circles – sometimes they can opt to work within the parameters of a discipline to use the legitimacy it has already obtained, at other times they can modify disciplinary methods in order to better suit their research and finally, feminist researchers may find the methodological tools at hand insufficient for their purposes and may work to create new methodologies to meet the needs of their projects.⁴ As Reinharz

2. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (Armonk: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).

3. Nancy Harstock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical materialism" in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983); Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is 'Strong Objectivity'?" *The Centennial Review* vol. 36, no. 3 (1992); Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives," *Feminist Studies* vol. 14 (1988); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Conscience and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2000); Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Mary Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry: From Political Conviction to Methodological Innovation* (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

4. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 243-4.

summarizes, “Feminist researchers cleverly devise ways of combining aspects of mainstream theory in a larger feminist framework. Feminist research, I believe, contributes to the disciplines, draws from the disciplines, and reacts against the disciplines in terms of data, methods and theory.”⁵ For research into feminist issues, disciplinary criteria and parameters do not always allow for the normative critique and emphasis on praxis that these researchers require.

One example of methodological inventiveness on the part of feminists has been the recent “interpretive turn” in the social sciences. In *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea build the framework for interpretive methods as a structured and empirical approach to research, on the same footing as quantitative approaches. Regarding the “turn” mentioned above, they explain: “The turning, then, is, by and large, twofold: it is a turning away from, if not against, the idea of a social scientific practice in which humans are conceptualized as objects, much as rocks or plants are in the physical and/or natural sciences, thereby erasing, too, the human traits of researchers; and it is a turning toward a rehumanized, contextualized set of practices.”⁶ The book presents a grounding for a rigorous and empirical notion of qualitative research that can withstand critique of it being too “subjective” or imprecise for academic standards. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea thus argue for the concept of “human science” that takes into consideration nuanced, contextualized knowledges. In building the case for an empirical basis for qualitative methods, they state, “Indeed, not only do we see no contradiction between empirical research

5. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 246.

6. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method*, xiv.

and meaning-focused analysis, as the book subtitle is intended to suggest; we are also of the view that the central focus of much empirical social science should be on problems of meaning.”⁷ What is interesting about their approach is that they do not claim and justify qualitative research on its own basis, but on similar grounds as other more accepted quantitative approaches – as rigorous in its own right, and with its own set of processes and outcomes. While quantitative methods allow for more measured results to test a hypothesis, qualitative, or interpretive, methods lend themselves to questions about power, which aren’t discernible through elite academic theories and research questions. In particular, cultures and communities can be studied in order to subvert the usual chain of knowledge-making, in which academic theories hold the authority to define and set the research agenda. As Yanow and Shea-Schwartz note, “Interpretive work of all kinds, in rendering tacit knowledge explicit, makes silenced discourses speak, thereby perforce engaging questions of power.”⁸ Methodologies, which are often not stated, frequently contain inherent prejudices regarding epistemological and ontological beliefs. These beliefs can then inadvertently be superimposed onto the “objects” of research through research methods. With interpretive approaches, the messiness and contradictions that often exist in human experiences are not glossed over with academic jargon and made to fit into acceptable categories. Instead, there is a more open-ended approach to research whereby the experiences of individuals are given priority and no causal links between theory and results is expected. As the authors assert, “For interpretive researchers, concepts are part of the everyday talk, lives, and written or depicted record of

7. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method*, xiv.

8. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method*, xxii.

situational actors and/or embedded within a literature, becoming part of the historical background that forms the context for scholarly thinking; the attempt to specify them a priori, as universal constructs, violates interpretive presuppositions about the historical locatedness of scholars and actors.”⁹ The intent behind interpretive methods to let individuals’ experiences speak back to discourses of power precludes the kind of generalizations that follow from top-down theoretical impositions. Interpretive methods, then, are one way that feminists have established their own methodological criteria to cater to the goals of their research. This sophisticated analysis seeks to build the foundation for qualitative approaches as an alternative to structured, top-down quantitative methodologies that have held prominence in the social sciences.

Another important factor in feminist methodology is the fact that feminism itself is such an expansive theoretical domain with a lack of coherence around its goals and strategies. As was illustrated in the second chapter, feminist theory has a long history of ideological and political movement and contains internal fissures and tensions. From a battle for civil rights to a conceptual push towards inclusion of multiply marginalized women, the question of what feminism is and who it stands for remains a work in progress. Indeed, this project itself proposes a different direction for feminist theory, arguing for the inclusion of religious women in broader categories of feminist agency. The third chapter also sketched the landscape of feminist theory, in particular, the emergence of poststructuralism, and showcased theorizations of possible reconciliation between universalism and particularity, advocating for a nuanced

9. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method*, xix.

universalism as a normative feminist goal. Since feminist theory and its various streams are amorphous and adaptive, its methodologies must follow suit. As Reinharz says, “[F]eminist researchers do not consider feminism to be a method. Rather they consider it to be a perspective on an existing method in a given field of inquiry or a perspective that can be used to develop an innovative method. The fact that there are multiple definitions of feminism means that there are multiple feminist perspectives on social research methods.”¹⁰ She explains that there are certain underlying assumptions that can frame feminist methodologies, such as taking women’s lives and experiences seriously, not just as a social category but as individual narratives, but there is no one way to structure, analyze and present this research. Other characteristics of feminist research are often creativity, self-reflexivity and affect; these are often utilized to oppose dominant disciplinary methodologies that can emphasize objectivity and empirical evidence. Feminist methodology contains an inherent imaginativeness and multiplicity due to its broad range of meanings, goals and strategies. Reinharz is careful not to idealize feminist theory; a variety of methods does not necessarily ensure a more equitable landscape. She acknowledges that women at the margins may still be silenced from engaging in feminist theorizing. She also points to academic gatekeeping in the form of journal and book editors, and others who are vested in certain theoretical perspectives, especially for feminists who wish to alter the status quo.¹¹ Judith A. Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow, writing in 2019, point out that the field of feminist methodology is in its early stages and is still developing its full potential. They ask:

10. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 241.

11. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 246-7.

Is feminist methodology that which feminist researchers *do* or that which they *aim* for? We argue that, at least within the field of sociology, feminist methodology is in the process of *becoming* and is not yet a fully articulated stance. Attempts to impose premature closure on definitions of feminist methodology run the risk of limiting its possibilities by stipulating a "correct" set of techniques without adequate opportunity to examine a wide variety of other approaches for their feminist relevance.¹²

According to them, we need to keep feminist methodologies open to innovations and continue to develop its inherent ability to evolve and meet the needs of researchers navigating feminist theory. This project, too, seeks to interrogate the current parameters of feminist theory, pushing back against one-dimensional views of religious women's agency.

Epistemology and Feminism

Considering the origins of feminist thought in reaction and opposition to dominant male categories and theoretical paradigms, an examination into feminist ontology and epistemology can clarify the methodologies that feminist research involves. In fact, it can be argued that issues of ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods all overlap in feminist research because of its self-reflexivity and insistence on challenging hegemonic theories. As Yanow and Shwartz-Shea suggest, methodologies contain inherent assumptions about epistemologies and even ontologies. Not understanding the implicit premises at one level of theoretical explication can lead to biases at other levels of the research process. For example, most feminists would counter positivist understandings of ontology as the fact of reality or "truth" that exists, ready to be discovered by the objective researcher. Instead, they would see the world in terms of social constructions and imbricated by power in which men have tended to control both the

12. Judith A. Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow, "Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research," in *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences*, ed. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (New York: Routledge, 1990), 71.

production and maintenance of society and knowledge. This ontological understanding then underpins their epistemological views, which in turn structure the kinds of methodologies and methods that are desirable for the particular research questions. While a deeper understanding of philosophical assumptions is beneficial for any academic endeavour, it is more important for feminist work due to questions of ethics – are there academic obstacles that stand in the way of feminist research? Do disciplinary boundaries prevent access to methodologies and methods amenable to feminist research? Are there biases that can prevent certain perspectives from achieving legitimacy? Who benefits from certain theoretical interventions? These are just a few of the ethical quandaries that can arise for feminist research because of its opposition to hegemonic discourses of gender, race, class, sexuality and other categories that are embodied by women at the level of individual and society. I posit that due to the sensitive nature of feminist research, the question of ethics must also be incorporated into a discussion of feminist methodology.

I will first discuss the importance of epistemology in the formation of feminist methodologies. If feminists believe that there is no one “true” ontology that is outside of social constructions, then their epistemologies will consist of a challenge to current forms of intellectual study that cater to “masculine” interests. The concept of epistemology has traditionally been aligned with scientific processes of objectivity to produce valid and reproduceable results. As Nina Lykke states, “In a traditional philosophical context, epistemology deals with criteria for a value-neutral, objective production of knowledge about the world, and in contrast to this, Feminist Studies is seen as and defines itself as partial and

political.”¹³ Because of this inherent tension, it has been challenging for feminists to develop their own epistemological approaches. Science, both in its study of nature and societies, has historically supported and legitimized women as inferior both in their biological and cultural categorizations, while claiming to be value-neutral. The imbrication of science with discourses of power that have achieved legitimacy both in politics and academia, through positivist epistemologies, further serves to create mistrust for feminists and necessitates critique and reconstruction for traditional epistemologies if they are to serve women’s interests.¹⁴ Although the term feminist epistemology may seem to be an oxymoron, it is quite possible to articulate alternative ways of producing knowledge to challenge hegemonic discourses.

Multiplicity and creativity are central tenets of a feminist methodology and this is reflected in the different ways that feminists understand epistemologies. Harding is a feminist philosopher who is considered one of the founders of feminist epistemology, and she has articulated three different categories: feminist empiricism, standpoint epistemology and post-modern epistemology.¹⁵ Since her foundational work, various other feminists have critiqued her categorizations, extended them and added to them. Lykke is an author who builds her own view of feminist epistemologies; while acknowledging her indebtedness to Harding’s theorization, she revises her third category as “postmodern feminist (anti-)epistemology” and adds a fourth category she calls “postconstructionist feminist epistemology.”¹⁶ A brief overview of Lykke’s epistemological categories will help illustrate different feminist methodologies and

13. Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 125.

14. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 125.

15. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986).

16. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 126.

methods that correspond to these epistemologies and demonstrate which of these perspectives are reflected in this dissertation. “Feminist empiricism” was an early intervention by Harding into epistemologies of science that posited Universal Man as the norm of scientific discovery and achievement. This approach pointed out the gender bias inherent in traditional disciplines and turns their own claim of objectivity on its head by showcasing its internal bias. As Lykke describes, “According to feminist empiricists, gender bias launches the disciplines onto a collision course with their own positivist ideals about objectivity and value neutrality, but the problems can be remedied with the tools of positivist empiricism itself.”¹⁷ For feminist empiricists, by prescribing more accurate measures for scientific knowledge, taking into account data about women’s experiences as well as men’s, then this bias can slowly be eliminated. This position does not push back against the limits of “objectivity” but played an important role in challenging dominant male bias in intellectual domains and paved the way for further critiques. “Feminist standpoint epistemology” takes its inspiration from the Marxist perspective of a privileged social class (for Marxists, the working class¹⁸), but instead posits that it is women from particular marginalized groups who have unique vantage points into potentially transformative ideas for women’s liberation. This theoretical perspective proposes a more radical solution to gender bias, not only as a scientific phenomenon, but as a pervasive societal ill that is constructed through specific social contexts. Harding herself points out that standpoint epistemology can serve as a better method of achieving “strong objectivity,”¹⁹ or

17. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 128-9.

18. It is important to note that the working class is not a privileged class in social life.

19. Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women’s Lives* (UK: Open University Press, 1991), 138-63).

robust criteria for science, since it takes into consideration external social conditions of data such as economic, political and personal factors, instead of only the internal logic of scientific objectivity. In terms of “postmodern feminist epistemology,” its main tenets and the stormy relationship between feminism and postmodernism has been explicated in detail in chapter 3. Here, I will only show its specific challenges to the aforementioned feminist epistemologies, as well as its potential to connect with their goal of destabilizing gendered categories. As Lykke mentions, postmodernism can be called an “anti-epistemology” because of its skepticism regarding foundational truths and grand narratives. Three ways that postmodern feminism challenges feminist empiricism and standpoint epistemologies are through its destabilizing of the category of “woman” as a social construct, the emphasis on subjectivity as being produced and reproduced through discourse, and the emphasis on a multiplicity of standpoints of different groups of marginalized women instead of any unified social category. Just as chapter 3 performed a careful consideration of postmodern thought, bringing out its strengths and weaknesses, Lykke is also optimistic about postmodern feminism’s contributions. She states:

To illustrate this I shall take a look at the ways in which the postmodern turn toward anti-epistemological, antifoundational, self-reflexive and deconstructive stances has been in consonance with feminist ideas and has inspired feminists to criticize and expose problems in feminist empiricism and standpoint epistemology in order to create space for alternative ways to do Feminist Studies.²⁰

To this end of positing alternative epistemologies for feminist research, Lykke adds a fourth category which she calls “feminist postconstructionism,” which she calls a temporary term to link contemporary feminist views that move beyond postmodernism to emphasize the importance of considering the materiality of the body alongside a discursive analysis. She is

20. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 131.

careful to point out that she uses feminist postconstructionism as an umbrella term for a variety of views that are inspired by postmodernism but ultimately go beyond it and critique it.²¹ Lykke's paradigm of different streams of feminism, which she adapts from Harding's original contribution, offer us one insight into feminist epistemologies.

On the other hand, Cook and Fonow present another understanding of feminist epistemology. In their view, one cannot understand feminist methodology without an adequate analysis of the underlying assumptions beneath them. While Lykke connects feminist epistemology with major theoretical developments in feminist thought, Cook and Fonow prefer to utilize a heuristic that outlines common underlying themes in different feminist research to showcase feminist epistemology. They believe this is a more comprehensive take on epistemology because it provides an overview of common feminist themes instead of specific methodologies, thus keeping the door open to future innovations.²² These five epistemological principles are as follow:

(1) the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life, including the conduct of research; (2) the centrality of consciousness-raising as a specific methodological tool and as a general orientation or "way of seeing"; (3) the need to challenge the norm of objectivity that assumes that the subject and object of research can be separated from one another and that personal and/or grounded experiences are unscientific; (4) concern for the ethical implications of feminist research and recognition of the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge; and (5) emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research.²³

Many, or all, of these principles can be seen as playing a role in Harding and Lykke's analysis of feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism and feminist

21. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 128-34.

22. Cook and Fonow, "Knowledge and Women's Interests," 71.

23. Cook and Fonow, "Knowledge and Women's Interests," 72-3.

postconstructionism. Instead of showing differences between different theoretical positions within feminist theory, their epistemological framing shows commonalities across a wide variety of feminist studies. I find this epistemology very useful for framing my own research as incorporating feminist methodology and epistemology, and will return to it in a later section.

Methodologies and Methods

As mentioned earlier, I will present feminist methodology as being interwoven in epistemology, methods and ethics. Having already discussed various feminist epistemologies, I will touch on their interrelated methodologies and methods. As Lykke explains, “A common distinction between *epistemology* and *methodology* is that the former deals with *criteria* for what constitutes scientific and scholarly knowledge, while the latter focuses on *rules, principles* and *procedures* for the production of knowledge. Distinct from methodology, *methods* relates to the *concrete approaches* chosen to carry out a particular piece of research.”²⁴ Accordingly, the kind of epistemology used will influence the direction of the methodology and methods in a particular feminist project. Lykke outlines the different methodological implications of the four epistemologies stated earlier: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism and feminist postconstructionism. For feminist empiricism, methodology would align with the goal of eliminating gender bias from scientific research. As mentioned earlier, this would involve the creation of research designs that impose strict standards of validity and accuracy to ensure that any bias regarding women is eliminated. Instead of challenging the notion of scientific objectivity, feminist empiricist methodology would aim to do it better to

24. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 144 (original italics).

achieve universally valid results, regardless of gender. Quantitative methods and empirical results can be most useful here to support scientific observations and data. For standpoint theorists, methodology will underline that research should privilege women's experiences; this would also involve certain ontological assumptions about the social construction of gender. Methodological principles can involve a beginning in women's experience, the experience of a particular group of marginalized women, or a broader analysis of society, with the aim of emancipation. Critical realism undergirds this kind of research - specifically, the assumption that a world exists to be studied by the researcher outside of discourse and language. Even though the researcher stands outside of this reality and studies it, she can articulate objective emancipatory insights from this standpoint perspective based in women's experiences. As for methods, they can vary based on the specific ontological assumptions of a study and its vision for societal transformation. At this level, qualitative methods are preferred over quantitative ones because of the focus on social analysis. For the epistemology of postmodern feminism, Lykke points out that the tendency towards anti-epistemology can also lead to an anti-methodology in which no technique can be used to understand women's oppression. By disrupting the ideas of grand narratives or stable categories altogether, postmodern feminist methodology can focus on deconstruction and multiplicity. Not only do postmodern feminists call into question the category of "woman" as a unified social category, they cast skepticism on the existence of fixed categories altogether outside of their creation through discourse. The methodological aim is then not to look for commonalities amongst women's experiences but disparities and divergences. Lykke states this this form of research

urges us to look for differences: between women, between men, between women and men, and within the individual woman and the individual man, and to ask about the effects of such differences for the 'object' and subject of research. Moreover, postmodern feminist research is often methodologically guided by a tendency to multiply gender in its intersections with other sociocultural categorizations, or to abandon predetermined categories altogether in favor of open ones, perhaps defined within the framework of a particular empirical analysis and whatever comes up as relevant in this specific context. To look for excess meanings, undecidable in-between spaces between fixed categories, boundary figures and ambiguous subject constructions that do not fit in with binary models such as woman/man, feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black and so on is also a central approach.²⁵

Because of this commitment to difference, postmodern feminists will focus on small-scale, contextualized studies instead of larger examinations that posit grand narratives for the amelioration of societal patriarchy. Similarly, they would critique notions of women's experience that are imbued with authenticity and insights for emancipation, since the category of woman is socially constructed. Lastly, there is an impetus towards linguistics as a challenge towards realist ontologies in which reality is an objective truth; instead, postmodern feminism emphasizes the discursive and narrative elements of identity formation, agency and cultural construction. The methodological implications of this are the exploration of narrative and discursive approaches as a technique to critique hegemonic master narratives and to articulate possibilities for resistance that do not essentialize women or their experiences. Lastly, Lykke explains methodologies for the variety of feminist epistemologies she calls "feminist postconstructionism." The theorists underneath this umbrella term work with premises of postmodern feminism but also push beyond them. Lykke asks, "What does it mean methodologically to take the body as a normative, but non-essentializing starting point, and to search for alternative feminist figurations in a rhizomatic and affirmative mode?"²⁶ She explains

25. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 148.

26. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 150.

that theorists who utilize sexual difference start with the materiality of the body, including its endless differences, as a methodological principle. The concept of rhizomes refers to a methodology in which concepts are in perpetual motion, sometimes connecting in non-hierarchical ways to produce unexpected explanations of processes, instead of fixed points. Lykke also outlines other methodological strategies for other postconstructionist feminists such as agential realism and situated knowledges, but for the purpose of sketching a broad framework of different methodologies coinciding with different feminist epistemologies, this should suffice.²⁷ While these generalized observations can be helpful in delineating different feminist methodological strands, Lykke ultimately argues for a multiplicity of methods (similar to Reinharz). Because of the existence of the epistemological pluralism within feminist studies, the interdisciplinary nature of feminist research and the innovative and creative impulses of this relatively new branch of academia, a plurality of methods is required.²⁸

Cook and Fonow's understanding of feminist methodologies and methods overlaps with Lykke to some extent, but also offers some new insights. They agree with Lykke that it is the overlay between ontology, epistemology, methodology, methods (and ethics, to varying degrees) that gives feminist research its unique flavour and adaptive qualities. Nevertheless, Cook and Fonow outline some aspects of research design and methods which are often utilized in feminist research. They are as follows: visual techniques (such as photography, videotaping and visual imagery), triangulation of methods (utilizing a variety of often very different research methods together), linguistic techniques (such as conversational analysis or verbal interaction),

27. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 145-50.

28. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 159-61.

textual analysis (studying written texts), refined quantitative approaches (such as scales or empirical studies to assess discrimination), collaborative strategies (sharing information through collectives) and use of the situation-at-hand (utilizing given social circumstances to elicit information).²⁹ To reiterate, all of these methods when used in the service of rectifying gender bias and discrimination can yield favourable results for feminist research and epistemologies. Reinharz offers her own understanding of feminist methodology as the sum of different research methods.³⁰ Although her themes for feminist methods is not the same as the previous thinkers, there are many convergences, which I will assess. She mentions that feminism is a perspective and not a specific research method and there are a multiplicity of research methods. Moreover, she asserts that feminist research critiques nonfeminist scholarship, is guided by feminist theory, may be transdisciplinary, aims to transform society, incorporates diversity, can include the researcher as an object of research, can develop special relations with the groups studied, and can define a special relation with the reader.³¹ Throughout these various discussions of feminist methodology and methods, we see some common threads, such as the emphasis on self-reflexivity, creativity and multiplicity. Moreover, we see that the methodology is often closely intertwined with the particular epistemological and ontological perspective of the researcher. Feminist research aims to integrate a more holistic approach at various levels, rendering its intentions and goals more transparent and explicit.

29. Cook and Fonow, "Knowledge and Women's Interests," 80-87.

30. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 240.

31. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 240.

Ethics

The field of ethics is amorphous and lends itself to various disciplines and uses. It can be a branch of philosophy focused on human conduct or it can be a part of institutional governance that emphasizes fairness and equity. For feminist research, an ethical approach draws attention to the process of producing research outside of dominant structures and discourses, and the difficulties of enacting social change, or “how to conduct research in ethically sustainable and morally responsible ways.”³² Since feminist research is still relatively new and in a process of becoming, it faces significant challenges both from within academic institutions and in trying to challenge hegemonic masculine norms and discourses in larger society. This is why the question of ethics is never far from feminist research; whereas traditional male-centered research presents itself as universally valid, feminists are required to also incorporate a justification for their research and to legitimize it within existing literature, disciplines, and canons. As one feminist author describes, “epistemology without ethics is deadly.”³³ This is the underlying sentiment behind much of feminist research; women do not have the luxury of ignoring implicit epistemological assumptions. Questions of ethics are paramount for feminist scholarship – they are integrated at every level of research design to ensure transparency and accountability. Two themes that I will draw out from the discussion on ethics in feminist methodology is the critique of academic bias and the emphasis on praxis as an integral focus of research.

32. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 144.

33. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991), chapter 7.

a) Countering Academic Bias

Cook and Fonow agree that a concern for the “ethical implications of feminist research and recognition of the exploitation of women as objects of knowledge”³⁴ is a key principle of feminist methodology. For them, it is important to analyze the “professional ethical questions”³⁵ that arise when women face not just cultural and societal oppression but academic marginalization as well. They criticize “gatekeeping practices” in academia that create obstacles for feminist research when choosing a topic, designing a research plan, obtaining funding, jobs or tenure, and the cooptation of women to serve non-feminist interests. They are also concerned with unnecessary and ideological obstacles in the publication and dissemination of feminist research.³⁶ Lykke agrees that challenging biases in knowledge production is a main priority for feminist research:

Intertwined with the ways in which feminist debates on epistemology radically problematize the positivist ideal of value-neutral and disinterested knowledge production, the question of values, morals and ethics emerges forcefully onto the agenda. This is integrated with critiques and revisions of traditional ethics and is based on different kinds of alternative ethical reflections.³⁷

She points out that empiricist feminists take issue with the assumptions of value-neutrality in scientific research, pushing for a more stringent requirement for accuracy and objectivity in order to eliminate gender bias.³⁸ This demand for scholarship constitutes a strong critique to traditional academic perspectives that universalize the masculine perspective. Moreover,

34. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 72-3.

35. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 78.

36. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 78.

37. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 156.

38. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 156.

feminist standpoint theory adds another layer of nuance to this critique by positing that research needs to prioritize women's experiences to "[articulate] a clear alternative to the abstract, decontextualized and universalist notions about 'the good,' 'rights,' 'moral conduct' and so on of traditional ethics."³⁹ According to this viewpoint, it is not enough for women to have a level playing field in academia, as feminist empiricists claim; we need to insert more opportunities for the voices of particular groups of women in order to remediate the gaps in traditional academic scholarship. Instead of using traditional epistemological strategies to include women, we need to create new epistemological tools with which to provide women with a chance to succeed in academic and intellectual endeavours. For example, black feminist standpoint theorists highlight the need to legitimize an ethics of care as an important source for producing knowledge about the social. Patricia Hill Collins is one black feminist who builds on conventional social science with a dimension of care emanating from the particular experiences of marginalized black women, but which extends to respect and empathy for, and solidarity with, other oppressed groups of women. She emphasizes the necessity of adding "feminine" values such as love, both as critical political and social starting points, and as an "ethical-moral foundation"⁴⁰ for an improved academic engagement with women. Postmodern feminism has also contributed to critiquing the universalizing impetus in feminist scholarship, not by adding another dimension of feminine values, but by deconstructing the very notion of essentialized gender. This radical critique of universalism has been conducive to feminists who work to push back against fixed intellectual concepts and hierarchies.⁴¹ Postconstructionist feminists also

39. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 156.

40. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 156.

41. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 157.

contribute to critiques of conventional academic standards through various methods, such as the challenging of binary oppositions (such as reason/emotions, masculine/feminine) that are “characteristic of phallogentric knowledge production.”⁴² Other feminists in this broad category gesture to the fallibility of research and the intimate ethical relationship between the “knower” and the “known,” or the “subject” and “object” of research. Karen Barad calls for responsible scholarship as an ethical requirement of feminist work, stating:

[W]e should not talk about an abstract, ethical subject who relates to a radically externalized other. Instead we should think about the researcher’s position as one that should imply taking moral responsibility for those networks, processes and relations in which she or he participates as embodied subject: Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part.⁴³

Barad adds to the critique of masculine discourse and hegemony in knowledge production by introducing the element of responsibility for the conceptualization, research design and results of feminist research. I will argue that this argument for responsibility can be used as a touchstone to challenge academic biases and hierarchies. Although many of the authors mentioned couch their critiques against epistemology, it is more fitting to address academia directly since epistemology is largely created within ivory towers and it is the locus of knowledge production and dissemination. Drawing on the ethical interventions of the aforementioned authors, I argue that a critique of academia and its conventions must also form the backbone of feminist research.

42. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 158.

43. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 393.

b) *Feminist Praxis as Ethical Imperative*

In my discussion of the necessity of ethical considerations as a constitutive of feminist research, the prioritization of *praxis* as a condition of theory is of utmost importance. As has been illustrated previously, women do not have the luxury of intellectualizing if it does not present possibilities for the improvement of women's material lives. Feminist theory arose as a response to oppressive material conditions and retains a counterhegemonic impulse. As the feminist adage, "The personal is the political" attests, the private and public spheres are not easily divided for women as in traditional liberal accounts.⁴⁴ Nor is the goal of feminist theory to acquiesce to current hierarchies of male privilege in knowledge production. As intersectional theorists have pointed out, problematic power differentials not just between men and women, but between different groups of women must be addressed as an ethical imperative, and the litmus test must be in the improvement of the *concrete, material* lives of all women. To this point, questions that must be addressed for feminist research include: Who is speaking as representative for which group of women? Who benefits from the academic interventions of certain scholarship, either through prestige or material gain? Who, or what, is left out of feminist theorizations? As Crenshaw states, "When they enter, we all enter."⁴⁵ She is referring to the need for feminist theory to be grounded in praxis and social change, and for it to be a

44. Renee Heberle, "The Personal is Political," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford Academic, 2015), 604.

45. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 167.

collective project – the goal should be the representation and amelioration of the lives of *all* women, starting with those who are most marginalized.

The enacting of social change can come through various avenues, from undermining patriarchal norms to better academic feminist research and more direct ways of effecting policy change to support women. Cook and Fonow point out that language is often used to further entrench the inferior social position of women: “The generic use of masculine pronouns, application of offensive adjectives to women's experiences, and subsumption of women under male category labels (e.g., considering lesbian issues as part of the topic of [male] homosexuality) are just some of the ways language is used for social control.”⁴⁶ Other feminist thinkers present alternative language strategies to subvert male hierarchies and assert creative control over speech and grammar.⁴⁷ The responsibility of ethical research when studying groups of marginalized women can also be a means of ensuring positive changes in the lives of these women. As Judith Dilorio explains:

Interpretation of the feminist goal of social change becomes problematic when the researcher seeks to intervene in the lives of those she is trying to understand. Because much of feminist politics involves the personal and intimate lives of women and men, any intervention risks the possibility of disrupting relationships that are personally satisfying to the participants and perhaps materially necessary for survival.⁴⁸

For example, she mentions her feeling of apprehension when conducting a participant-observation study of women working in the automotive industry whose potential for

46. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 78.

46. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 78.

47. Judith A. Dilorio, “Feminist fieldwork in a masculinist setting: Personal problems and methodological issues.” Paper presented at the *North Central Sociological Association Annual Meetings* (Detroit, 1982), 14.

independence were severely curtailed under their present working conditions; she questions her own complicity in these structural oppressions through the inadequacy of her academic explanations which do not impact the women's lives for the better. Ethical treatment of women who are considered objects of study prioritize the women's well-being over extractive and exploitative use of these women as sources of data and information. Lastly, Reinharz discusses feminist social change through consciousness-raising to spread awareness about women's discrimination, as well as through direct policy recommendations; both of these are strengthened through research that supports specific political strategies. For example, she cites feminist scholarship to study gendered employment gaps and suggest specific policies to remediate structural workplace hierarchies. Reinharz states:

The international feminist community remains concerned that social research both contribute to the welfare of women and contribute to knowledge. This is the dual vision – or dual responsibility – that many feminist researchers see as part of their multiple responsibilities. It is part of the general burden on women to satisfy multiple constituencies (including themselves) simultaneously.⁴⁹

She showcases the responsibility feminist academics feel to be accountable to communities of women and to contribute to political and social amelioration of women's lives. This is an added layer of ethical scholarship that is a "burden" and a "responsibility," but also a saving grace in that it enables better scholarship to remedy the historical legacy of women's exclusion, and the possibility of imagining alternatives. Whether through empirical work or the finessing of theory, the emphasis on praxis as the motivating force and goal behind feminist research works towards the transformation of gender relations in society.

48. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods*, 251.

Lykke also highlights the way that feminist epistemologies cater to the analysis and improvement of women's material lives and conditions. For example, she states, "In classic feminist standpoint epistemology, questions of political values and social justice are... central and outspoken."⁵⁰ Standpoint feminists often do this through underlining the importance of women's every day lives and practices, such as mothering, and values, such as care and empathy. The starting position of the intricacies of women's lives allows for a critical social and political view of naturalized gendered discrimination and structural hierarchies. Irigaray's feminist interventions have been discussed in detail in chapter 3. Here, I will only point out her use of ethics as a radical critique of phallogocentrism in society and culture. She advocates for a new understanding of sexual difference to diffuse the male symbol which permeates society, science, culture and philosophy. Her theory deconstructs the stereotype "which allocates the material, corporeal, sensible, "natural" to the feminine,"⁵¹ not to deny women these characteristics but to question how they have been formed and whether women are able to achieve their full subjectivity within this framework. This, too, is a radical push for social and cultural change, through philosophical and psychoanalytic critique, to improve women's conditions. Other writers such as Braidotti also prioritize women's bodies and the necessity of sustainable development as a goal for feminist epistemology.⁵² Cook and Fonow confirm that "the focus on ethical dimensions is related to the final epistemological assumption concerning

49. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 156.

50. Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, 149.

51. Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 158.

knowledge and social change.”⁵³ The topics of ethics as related to academic practices and praxis are intrinsically connected and are fundamental concerns for feminist research.

Left Universalism and Muslim Feminist Ethics as Feminist Methodology

I have given a summary of feminist methodology as an emerging area of feminist thought that is in the process of becoming; some general characteristics of this methodology are self-reflexivity, multiplicity and creativity. There is a conscious acknowledgement of the interconnection between various levels of theory, such as ontology, epistemology, methodology, methods and ethics, to produce transparent and responsible research that is critical of academic obstacles and is rooted in social transformation. Throughout this dissertation, I have spelled out a normative basis for feminist and cultural universalism to push back against one-dimensional views of religious agency. As mentioned previously, I have let the ideas guide the direction of the methodology instead of imposing a methodology from the outset. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explicitly outline why this dissertation fits into the description of feminist methodology by bringing together its structural and conceptual themes. Using the starting point of Cook and Fonow’s basic epistemological principles mentioned above, I will show how this dissertation fits into a feminist methodological framework:

a) Centring Gender

Cook and Fonow stress “the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry as a basic feature of all social life.”⁵⁴ In this

52. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 89.

53. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 72.

project, the literature on religious agency is placed under the umbrella of feminist political theory to highlight questions of women's marginalization in discussions of agency. I situate the literature not in a separate niche of its own, but alongside other concerted efforts by feminist writers to push back against one-dimensional views of women that reduce the full horizon of their capabilities and desires. In this, efforts of early feminist empiricism resonate in their adamant view that women should be included in mainstream understandings of science. It also builds on other feminist philosophers⁵⁵ who reclaim a place for women as capable of reason and philosophy. They point out that excluding women is not a comment on women's capabilities but male hegemony and bias, and suffusing dominant theory with women's voices adds depth and dimension to it. In centring women's agency and capabilities instead of pushing back against secular liberal sensibilities, for example, I want to shift focus to the ways that literature on religious agency can inadvertently limit women's self-understandings as well as societal understandings. In attending to concerns of gender, I also adopt an ontological perspective in which patriarchal norms are socially constructed, even within religious communities that purport to support gendered hierarchies. I show that there is no sphere of exceptionalism for patriarchy in religious societies or in religious women's agency. There is no "true" ontological perspective, and religious life is also the amalgamation of social norms, such as cultural interpretations and interpretations of scripture, and can contain divergences and tensions, as well as be open to change. My view of ontology is thus in line with most feminist approaches that emphasize the imbrication of privilege and material advantage that has

54. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Code, *Ecological Thinking*; Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry*.

sidelined some feminist questions from academia. I also incorporate the standpoint feminist “view from below” by puncturing abstract notions of abstract theory with women’s perspectives and experiences. I incorporate postmodern feminism’s skepticism of universalism, along with postconstructionist feminism’s push to move beyond postmodernism and critique its limitations. Although it hasn’t been emphasized in the discussion on feminist epistemology, the dissertation also incorporates aspects of socialist feminism, such as McNally’s critique of postmodernism’s neglect of the (female) body, Bannerji’s dialectical approach to feminist universalism and Sekyi-Otu’s understanding of communism as human practical activity and justice for all cultures (and genders). Moving from feminist ontology to epistemology (understood according to Lykke as different theoretical traditions of feminism), the dissertation asserts a comprehensive approach to feminist methodology.

It is important to point out a gap in the dissertation when it comes to centring gender, and that is its heteronormative focus. Although there is plentiful recent research on religion (specifically Islam) and homosexuality and other nonbinary sexualities,⁵⁶ this project has proceeded along largely heteronormative assumptions. As gender equality between men and women is an important step in the recognition of other kinds of gender identities, the project of expanding religious agency along the lines of feminist agency can allow for future research on other forms of sexualities as well. For example, a new understanding of religious agency as

55. Nicole Kligerman, "Homosexuality in Islam: A Difficult Paradox" *Macalester Islam Journal* 2 (Issue3, 2007); Samar Habib, *Islam and Homosexuality* (ABC-CLIO, 2009); Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010); Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Olfa Youssef, *The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman: Over Inheritance, Marriage and Homosexuality*, trans. Lamia Benyoussef (Lexington Books, 2017); Omar Kasmani, *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy, and Sainly Affects in Pakistan* (Duke University Press, 2022);

encompassing an appreciation of women's sexuality not as an impediment to modesty, but as complementary to it, can be grounds for innovative future research. This acknowledgement of the limitations of this study is indicative of a self-reflexive and transparent feminist research that takes responsibility for its shortcomings, even while legitimizing the importance of the project. The centring of gender and gender asymmetry is critical to expanding notions of religious agency.

b) *Consciousness-Raising*

Following along the epistemological principles of Cook and Fonow, consciousness-raising, or raising awareness about feminist issues becomes a defining feature of feminist research, both as "a specific methodological tool and as a general orientation or 'way of seeing.'"⁵⁷ Feminist research is concerned with raising awareness about feminist issues and inculcating a broader understanding of women's struggles, both in academia and in society at large. Related to the first point about centring gender, this principle involves a level of activism and passion that pushes back against hegemonic discourses and male bias. As Yanow and Schwartz-Shea point out, interpretive feminist work can "[make] silenced discourses speak, thereby perforce engaging questions of power."⁵⁸ This dissertation is also motivated by a desire to push back against abstract academic conventions that belie my own participation in communities of religious Muslim women. My lived experience speaks back to specific encapsulations of religious agency that are reflected in the literature under review. The project aims to shed light on different levels of marginalization and exclusion of Muslim women, from the meta-

56. Cook and Fonow, "Knowledge and Women's Interests," 72.

57. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method*, xxii.

philosophical level of secular bias to modern liberal sensibilities against Muslims, secular and gendered bias in the academy and finally to postcolonial and postmodern depictions of religious agency that are limited in scope. I argue that creative theoretical contributions from the margins can impact privileged positions within communities and culture, both religious and secular. Moreover, this intervention into universalism aims to re-write imperialistic narratives in which Islamic culture and thought have been stagnant for centuries. The proposed research will contribute to the advancement of feminist thought by intervening in abstract forms of theory that do not consider the fullness and diversity of women's agency. While conceptualizations of pious agency aim for analytical clarity through a theoretical approach, I will show that it is not possible to segregate academic discourse from broader society and politics, and the compartmentalization of religious agency from other kinds of feminist agency can have detrimental effects on these women's lives. The project aims to raise awareness about religious women's potential by reconciling theoretical versions of universalism with particularity to enable more nuanced gendered and cultural philosophical conceptualizations of religious agency. There is an underlying impetus towards consciousness-raising as a motivational factor and a goal, and this will connect to the emphasis on praxis that will be considered later.

c) Challenging "Objectivity"

Another defining feature of feminist research is its challenging of norms of "objectivity" according to a masculine ideal that is universalized. While feminist empiricists first called into question the male bias in norms of science by arguing for more stringent requirements of objectivity, later feminists have contested understandings of objectivity altogether as being inaccurate for their separation of the subject and object of research. Through the utilization of

an interdisciplinary and creative approach in methodology and content, feminist research often blurs the lines between the subject and object of research to showcase the vulnerability and fallibility of academically-grounded research. This dissertation incorporates literature from post-secularism, political theory, feminist philosophy, Islamic philosophy and feminist political theory. It also works to integrate several different layers of philosophical abstraction, from the meta-philosophical level of secularism to liberal political ideology, feminist critiques of philosophy and finally more subjective theoretical understandings of feminist agency. By consciously asserting that religious women's agency need not have its own sphere of exceptionalism and may be a part of feminist agency, I am collapsing boundaries of secularism in the academy and emphasizing the primacy of feminist agency as a multidimensional and relational phenomenon, regardless of religious or secular influences. Another aspect of multiplicity or interdisciplinary feminist methodology in this dissertation has to do with the reconciliation of opposing sets of theoretical vantage points, specifically universalism and particularity. This allows for a mediated perspective that is amenable to different concretizations in praxis. On one hand, expanding religious agency can allow for the inclusion of more varieties of religious interpretation that can push back against religious patriarchy. On the other hand, including religious agency as a legitimate form of feminist agency also resists male domination in the Western philosophical tradition, and asserts that women's desires and capabilities must not be defined a priori. Hence, a renewed and extended conceptualization of religious agency can open up lines of inquiry and creativity both for religious and secular, and non-Western and Western, understandings and future research. Moreover, the prioritization of women's agency (as an internal process emanating outwards) as the starting point for

discussions of religious agency as opposed to notions of ethical formations (as a process of internalizing power dynamics, starting from the external) puts the emphasis on personal and grounded experiences of womanhood, and of women being active agents in the making of their lives, whether they choose to embody religious norms or not. This starting point also counteracts abstract or external notions of theory that may be viewed as more authoritative or objective. Lastly, I directly interrogate “objective” notions of theory through a dialectical approach that harmonizes subjective and objective theories for a nuanced basis of gendered and cultural universalism. This intervention performs a feminist mediation into apparently contradictory theories to showcase sensitive and creative alternatives to theoretical impasses that can stifle academic depictions of women’s agency. Instead of presenting a preferred method for reconciling universal and particular theories, I choose to present multiple theorizations that address different perspectives and angles – this allows for a richer analysis and discussion and prioritizes a variety of perspectives over singular authoritative theories. In resisting masculine norms of objectivity, feminist research employs an interdisciplinary methodology that prioritizes multiplicity and creativity instead of reproducing hegemonic academic norms and maintaining forms of traditional legitimacy and hierarchy.

Another method for challenging norms of objectivity that is common in feminist methodology is blurring the boundary between subject and object of research to the extent that the writer is themselves incorporated into the research. Feminist research challenges an artificial norm of objectivity in which the researcher performs a neutral analysis of objects from a removed, pristine and privileged position. This is not an accurate depiction of most academic research, which is motivated by deeply personal struggles and interests. With quantitative and

qualitative research, feminist methodology urges transparency and accountability with regard to the “objects” of study. The academic must be cognizant of their own privileged position and ensure that the communities under study (which are usually marginalized to begin with) do not endure any further harm through the process of providing data. Information must be obtained in a non-extractive way that does not replicate traumatic experiences and ethical processes of conducting research must be designed and carried out. While this dissertation is a theoretical intervention and does not utilize quantitative or qualitative data, it is a project that is rooted in deeply personal struggles both in the academy and in my religious community. Although the arguments are presented in abstract theoretical terms, the project is also a personal challenge to reconcile what appear to be my two contradictory worlds as a Muslim woman studying theory in the academy and as a member of a close-knit religious community in which traditional gender roles do not usually align with women pursuing doctorates and careers. For me, the project of expanding religious agency, and mediating between the “subjective” and “objective” is a personal effort to create lines of dialogue and mutual cooperation between my two worlds. I earnestly believe that my struggle is one that affects many other women, whether religious or not, who face societal structures that are not compatible with their personal experiences and subjectivity. Although the scope of this dissertation does not allow me to bring more of myself into the dissertation, through interviews with members of my community, ethnography or auto-ethnography, I do hope to build on the theoretical foundation created by this dissertation and conduct further research that incorporates the voices of Muslim women, including myself. By asserting transparency, responsibility and self-reflexivity, I situated this research within a feminist methodology that challenges notions of objectivity in academia and society.

d) *Ethical Feminist Research*

Another principle of feminist research explicated by Cook and Fonow is the central concern of the ethical implications of intellectual work. This was explicated on earlier in the section, “Countering Academic Bias,” as an ethical imperative of feminist methodology. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this can apply to awareness about the exploitation of women who are being studied as objects of research, but it can also apply to the process by which academics produce this knowledge. A central theme that runs through this dissertation is the reckoning of the academy as the authoritative site of knowledge production. In three out of five chapters of the dissertation, I include a section critiquing the academy from different perspectives and for different kinds of research/researchers. This critique contains both an internal and external component, pointing out how the university is complicit in elitist forms of theory that do not accurately represent marginalized groups, as well as in neoliberal directives towards efficiency and productivity where intellectual work is treated as capital to attract investment and compete with other institutions. At the internal level, I have detailed how academic gatekeeping can make it difficult for women and minorities to achieve success, while adherence to dominant intellectual trends can also serve to keep alternative understandings and critiques at bay. In the first chapter outlining the emergence of secularism, the academy was critiqued as a neutral institution of knowledge production – thinkers such as Foucault and Said show the imbrication of power and knowledge in reproducing inequalities and hierarchies. Brown shows that there is a secular bias in the academy that prevents religious research from being given equal consideration as secular work; within political theory, this bias is reproduced through political theorists in the Western canon who align rationality and critique with secularism.

Chapter 2 builds on this secular bias by showcasing that religious women, both within the academy and in literature, face an uphill battle due to institutional and epistemological barriers. When considering the latter, I noted the hegemonic status of certain academic discourses, such as the poststructuralist and postcolonial literature on religious agency. Thinkers were discussed who questioned whether this literature accurately represents the majority of Muslim women and their lived experiences. This was shown to be a problem of elitist forms of theory in which academic discourse is not grounded in community and open to growth and change. The fourth chapter critiqued the academy from a decolonial perspective, highlighting that it has internalized the colonial project and can hinder non-Western scholars and research. Efforts at diversification can become tokenistic if they are not accompanied with genuine decolonization at the level of ideas and cultural understanding. Academic ideas that reproduce colonial ideas can have political impacts through strategies such as Orientalism, teleology and historicism. The problem of ethical translation was also shown to be a significant issue since Western and English intellectual ideas tend to dominate the academy. Gender can also play a role, creating an extra layer of obstacles for racialized women in the academy. The chapter concluded with an urgent plea to decolonize the university to enable more ethical conditions of knowledge production, especially for racialized, religious women, who bear the brunt of different layers of difficulty. Postcolonial thinkers have raised important questions about the way that power dynamics of political and social spheres are replicated in the academy – which must take responsibility for ensuring that historical injustices are not repeated. In summary, a critique of the academy as a primary concern for feminist research is a strong undercurrent of this

dissertation – in this way, the project aligns itself with feminist methodology and its concern for ethical research.

e) Transforming Society

The last principle of feminist methodology mentioned by Cook and Fonow is the “emphasis on the empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research.”⁵⁹ The previous section entitled “Feminist Praxis as Ethical Imperative” detailed why the question of social transformation lies at the heart of feminist research. This dissertation is also motivated by a desire to a) understand whether the literature on religious agency accurately depicts Muslim women and b) to categorize religious agency under the umbrella of feminist agency to argue for a relational and multidimensional view of women’s agency both for religious and non-religious women. While this is a theoretical project, and I am keenly aware of its limitations in praxis at this stage, it aspires to lay a foundation for more research on feminist agency that can challenge masculine representations of women that undermine the fullness of their capabilities and desires. Hence, I aim at social transformation through an appreciation of feminist agency as a complex and expanding basis for asserting the validity and importance of feminist issues and change, both at the personal and societal level. This social transformation is not possible without better forms of theorization that do not limit themselves to abstract representations. One of the strengths of theory is its ability to imagine alternative realities, but this can also be its downfall if abstract thought is not grounded in concrete reality, and capable of adapting to meet the needs of those it represents.

58. Cook and Fonow, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests,” 73.

In the second chapter, I critiqued the secular bias as enabling representations of Muslim women that do not take into consideration that full range of their feminist agency. I also challenged academic discourse that can create a disjuncture between elitist forms of theorization and praxis, arguing that any intellectual discourse that becomes hegemonic can lose its basis in lived experience and its focus on the material improvement of women's lives. Since the literature on religious agency falls under the broad theories of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, it can be subsumed by dominant intellectual trends within this theoretical paradigms. As I outline in chapters 3 and 4, there is a spectrum of theoretical diversity within both of these theoretical frameworks, with what I called "strong program" postmodernism and postcolonialism, as well as "weak program" or "reflexive" versions. By creating space for "reflexive" theorizations of these intellectual models that can reconcile both particular and universal elements, I puncture abstract representations of religious women's agency with a fuller account of feminist agency that can contain both submissive and non-submissive aspects. This move is motivated by a desire to anchor religious agency within praxis, or women's lived ambiguous and negotiated identities, rather than a one-dimensional understanding that emphasizes subjection and obedience in the private sphere. Instead of categorizing religious agency as its own theoretical sphere with exceptional rules of engagement, including some aspects of indirect feminism and political potential, I invert the hierarchy to include religious agency as one kind of feminist agency, hence aligning it with other women's struggles in various contexts of patriarchy. This theoretical move has a democratizing effect for religious women, allowing a broader understanding of their capabilities, motivations and desires. The third chapter contained efforts to showcase more reflexive understandings of feminist theory to

interrogate some of the weaknesses of strong program feminist poststructuralism and to make it more amenable to feminist praxis. Through a dialectical method of reconciling particularity and universalism, different writers theorize nuanced frameworks for feminist research. For example, Code expands on ecological thinking as necessarily leading to a commitment to social justice because of the experience of oppression and the epistemological strategy that gives equal weight to quotidian struggles as to theoretical explanations of this struggle. Khader defines her theory as “an understanding of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression, coupled with an understanding of transnational feminist praxis as aiming at justice enhancement in a world characterized by historical and ongoing imperialism.”⁶⁰ Her conceptualization of universalism is also rooted in women’s everyday lives. In chapter 4, other theorists articulate nuanced understandings of cultural universalisms to enable postcolonial theories that give equal weight to both theory and praxis. The legacy and continuing impact of colonialism has structured the field of postcolonialism and ensures that it stays rooted in revolutionary praxis as a means to attain both internal and external independence. Some strands of postcolonial theory, such as anticolonialism and Marxist postcolonialism prioritize liberatory struggle and political and economic independence while some strands of decolonial theory and feminist postcolonialism challenge psychological, epistemological and cultural spheres of influence. These are different methods of achieving social transformation, whether at the personal or political level. Sekyi-Otu also emphasizes the need to ground his theory of left universalism in cultural experiences of human fulfilment and recognition that relate to

59. Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

universal experiences of being human. Abdillahi and Walcott present a cogent argument for situating theories about Black people in their lived experiences through their “Black Test.” This heuristic ensures that generalized theory is accountable to, and aims to improve, the lives of Black peoples and the inequalities and difficulties they face every day. Through its intervention into abstract theories that displace or ignore the lives of women and other minorities, this project is motivated by the goal of social transformation, and this is indicative of its use of feminist methodology.

Towards a Multidimensional and Relational Feminist Agency

After enunciating the methodological framework of this project as a feminist project, I bring together the various theoretical threads to propose an expanded model of feminist religious agency that can incorporate multidimensional and relational aspects. Through a thorough appreciation of Mahmood’s theoretical intervention in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, I find a foundation for an understanding of religious agency. Through her ethnographic work and analysis, she shows that pious agency need not always be oppositional; the women in her study are able to assert their agency through ethical self-transformations in which they mould themselves according to religious dictates. Mahmood challenges Eurocentric assumptions that these women must assert themselves through autonomous, oppositional acts to be intelligible as feminist agency. I am indebted to Mahmood for her brave and brilliant work into a neglected area of feminist thought. If understood broadly, Mahmood’s analysis of passive and performative religious agency is an exemplification of an important aspect of feminist agency – many aspects of care ethics and mothering, for example, incorporate a process of becoming that is not dissimilar to the acts of self-

transformation Mahmood describes.⁶¹ Not many people engaged in care work of a loved one would conform to the liberal model of autonomy by describing their experience as oppressive or limiting of their agency. Rather, they might describe their experiences, as contradictory as they may be, as also enhancing their potential and self-understandings. I value Mahmood, and Butler, for this valuable insight into not only women's experiences, but the human condition. I utilize Mahmood's theoretical contribution and seek to expand her notion of religious agency in line with other feminist philosophical contributions that have broadened the scope of feminist agency. While religious agency can, indeed, inculcate patriarchal norms and work at an ethical level of subjectification, it can also take on other forms that show universal motivations such as feminism and politics.

At the theoretical level, why has religious agency been depicted in the dominant literature as passive and patriarchal? While Mahmood states that she is countering secular and liberal assumptions, I show that her theorization falls into the very secular bias she works to challenge. Through an explication of the emergence of secularism as a Western phenomenon containing internal tensions and through the exclusion of Others, a secular bias is created that is reproduced and reified in the academy. In this binary, secularism is aligned with reason and humanism while religion is then associated with irrationality and oppression. I argue that the depiction of religious agency along the lines of submission and subjectification inadvertently falls into the secular binary by emptying religious agency of reason and humanism. While there

60. Sarah Clark Miller, "Need, Care and Obligation," in *The Philosophy of Need*, ed. Soran Reader (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 137; Eva Kittay, "The Ethics of Care, Dependence and Disability," *Ratio Juris* vol. 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 51. Sarah Drews Lucas, "The primacy of narrative agency: A feminist theory of the self" (PhD diss., 2016).

is ample literature discussing Muslim women's participation in feminist and political movements, this is not seen as an aspect of their religious agency; if anything, it is despite their pious identities, or their religious subjectivities are in tension with their overt public activism. By showcasing how religious agency replicates a secular bias, I seek to make a different theoretical intervention than Mahmood. A genuine challenge to secularism would allow for religious agency to also contain the so-called pillars of secularism, namely humanism and reason. This dissertation also avoids using religious women's lives to prove an abstract theoretical argument about secularism by making a two-pronged argument about religious agency. At the level of theory, I point out that religious agency can be rational, political and feminist, and it can have a presence in the public sphere. After showing the gaps in the existing literature, I suggest alternative perspectives about religious agency. A non-essentialized version of Islam can claim its own tradition of political and feminist theorization. Certainly, the philosophical and scientific contributions from the Islamic Golden Age from the 8th to the 14th century demonstrate the ambitious and universal scope of ideas inspired by religion. The works that flourished in this period were not overdetermined by liberalism, colonialism or secularism, and sought to elaborate innovative solutions to societal and political problems. For example, Abu Nasr Al-Farabi was a philosopher and jurist who wrote in the medieval period in Baghdad and was influenced by a myriad of Christian, Greek and Muslim sources. His writing reflects an ethos of universality in religion and a unique brand of secularism that also creates a space for religious expression.⁶² During Al-Farabi's time, religious identity was not homogenized and

⁶² Alfarabi, "The Political Regime." *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

regulated, but flowed freely between cultures and faiths. The medieval Islamic thinker Al-Kindi⁶³ proposed a sophisticated cosmopolitan view of philosophy while Ibn Rushd⁶⁴ proposed an anachronistically feminist perspective of women's political equality in his commentary on Plato's *The Republic*. Ibn Tufayl, in his allegorical novel, posited that natural reason was available to all, although he differed from Kant in that there was no contradiction between faith and reason.⁶⁵ A glance through Islamic thought highlights how modern epistemological constructions and academic discourse can circumvent broader understandings and applications of religion. These references point to the need to overcome the secular binary and to use religious works to sketch alternative conceptualizations in which religious agency can also be political and feminist, containing possibilities for concrete transformation and change.

At the subjective level, I show that religious agency can be multidimensional and relational. Feminist agency is not only theoretical but deeply personal; as such, social transformation must be accompanied by a change in the subjective sphere as well. Religious agency, too, can contain a full range of capabilities and motivations that are not always pious in the traditional sense of the term. An exclusive focus on piety in the existing literature can prevent an appreciation of other forms of agency that can fall within a religious context. By placing religious women's agency within the fold of feminist agency, I create space for a variety of subjective and interpersonal conceptualizations of agency. We can find examples within

62. Kindi, d., and Alfred L. Ivry. *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics; a Translation of Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi's Treatise "on First Philosophy" (fi Al-Falsafah Alula)*, 1st ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974).

63. Averroes (Ibn Rushd), and Ralph. Lerner. *Averroes on Plato's Republic*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

64. Ibn Tufayl, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Malik. *The Improvement of Human Reason Exhibited in the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdhan*. (Project Gutenberg, 2005).

Islamic literature that encourage a heterogeneous view of women (and men's) subjectivities. The powerful poetic work of Jalal al-Din Rumi, an Islamic scholar of the 13th century, focuses on the unity of divine love, showcasing the numerous ways this love manifests in life, through an appreciation for nature, platonic and romantic love. His invocations for inner contemplation reflect the mystical tradition of Islam; he urges creativity and passion as a part of the quest for divine unity. Kecia Ali explores controversial issues of sexual ethics in Islam, such as sex within marriage, divorce, and homosexuality. She shows Islamic traditions as having a positive view of human sexuality, although it is confined to within marriage.⁶⁶ There are other places where Islamic traditions place emphasis on women's financial independence in marriage, as well as their right to divorce. From her expertise on Islamic law, Ali examines what she sees as *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, showing where she believes religious ethics support gender equality, and where they seem to work against it. These writers push for a religious agency that can contain multiple dimensions and which is deeply imbricated in social relations. By expanding religious agency at the structural and subjective level, I build on the existing literature to align religious agency with models of feminist agency.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have sketched out some gaps in the current literature on pious religious agency. While the novel conceptualization presented by Mahmood and other others has posed some important questions about forms of liberal autonomy, it needs to be further broadened if it is to avoid reifying the secular binary whereby religious women are necessarily

65. Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 6.

oppressed, and to open discussion on the complex subjectivities that religious agency can entail. The way that pious agency has been taken up so widely in analyses of religious women was perhaps not intended by Mahmood herself, who preferred localized and contextual ethnography. But the hegemonic nature of this burgeoning literature now calls for creative formulations of agency that more accurately represent the complex nature of these women, and all women who want to avoid being categorized or essentialized. Women's agency must be understood both as political and thereby transformational, as well as personal and reflective of all the facets of their identity.

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